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SEPTEMBER 1984

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OPINION

by Robert Silverberg

A few months ago in these pages I was lamenting the dearth of genuine speculative thought in much of the science fiction of the 1980s. Too much of what passes for SF nowadays, I grumbled, is based on familiar and unchallenging ideas ("Nuclear warfare is bad for civilization") or simply isn't science fiction at all ("Then Ceoderic the Strong lifted his two-handed blade and swung it mightily about his head as the wizard of the tawny eyes, smiling his inscrutable smile, began to chant the Spell of Nine. . . .")

Perhaps I'm a little jaded, after close to forty years of reading the stuff. What may be a dazzling new idea to you is likely to be old and worn to me, I grant you. But I don't think that's the essential issue. I'm still capable of responding to a wondrous new concept with that splendid chill down the spine. I can't find those concepts in the places where I'm accustomed to looking for them, that's all.

While the current batch of SF writers are busy churning out the umpteenth rehash of the atomic-doom potboiler or spinning their latest cute-&-cuddly elf-&-unicorn trilogies, real speculative thinking does seem to be going on elsewhere — the genuine item, the kind that supposedly is the thing done so well in the brand of imaginative literature we love. Twice in the past month my daily newspaper has brought me a startling new concept of the sort I once expected to find turning up in the works of my favorite writers.

Consider this headline, for instance:

FARAWAY STAR THAT MAY RAIN DEATH ON EARTH

A review of the latest Arthur C. Clarke novel? Ah, no. It's a report on a theory offered by scientists at Princeton and Berkeley to explain why vast waves of extinction have swept over the Earth at regular intervals over the past hundreds of millions of years.

The story here begins with the work of a group of physicists and geologists at Berkeley led by Nobel laureate Luis Alvarez and his son Walter, who have observed abnormally high concentrations of the rare metallic element iridium in two areas of the Earth's crust, one dating from 65 million years ago, the other from about 230 million years ago. They postulated that these deposits resulted from the collision of huge extraterrestrial objects with the Earth — an impact that must have caused intense environmental disturbance that may have been responsible for the destruction of most, though not all, life on our world.

Meanwhile a group of University of Chicago paleontologists, scanning the fossil record of the past 250 million years, had observed seven major "extinction events," coming apparently at regular intervals millions of years apart, in which more than 20%

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of the families of plant and animal life on Earth had died out simultaneously. Mating this theory to the Alvarez group's iridium findings was the work of Walter Alvarez and the Berkeley astrophysicist Richard A. Muller, who traced evidence of a dozen or so ancient impact craters suggesting collision with extraterrestrial bodies. They found that these catastrophes seemed to occur every 28.4 million years. On each occasion, they suggested, so huge a cloud of debris was hurled into the air that the Sun's warmth was kept from reaching the surface of the Earth — bringing on a bleak, interminable winter that set in motion a cascading swarm of extinctions.

The last piece in the theory was provided by astronomers Mark Davis of Berkeley and Piet Hut of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study — and here is where the breathtaking science-fictional thinking comes in. They proposed, in conjunction with Muller and Walter Alvarez, that ***the Sun has a dark companion that travels in a vast orbit several light-years in diameter.*** Every 28.4 million years, they said, this dark star (they suggest calling it "Nemesis") returns to the vicinity of our solar system; and, passing through a region known as the Oort cloud outside the orbit of Pluto where some 100 billion comets dwell, it jolts a billion or so of these comets loose and sends them heading inward toward the Sun — and a dozen of them, maybe, crash down upon the Earth, touching off the super-winter that brings extinction.

A dazzling notion, I think. Not only does it stir the most vivid and poetic images — the dark star making its long journey toward us, the comets ripped from their orbits and plunging across the night, the deadly cloud of dust and rubble blotting out the Sun — but it arouses, also, profound philosophical questions about the value of human striving, the course of evolution, and much more. It is an idea worthy of Olaf Stapledon or H. G. Wells, who are probably the two deepest thinkers we can claim as writers of science fiction. If one of us had looked up for a moment from the wizards and dragons, would we have stumbled on so astounding a conceptual chain? Nice to think so. But most of us are too busy spinning our trilogies of retreaded Celtic lore.

The second startling idea of the month came from the University of Toronto, where disciples of the late speculative thinker Marshall McLuhan have come to the conclusion that the atomic bomb may well be a good thing for modern society. "I'm absolutely delighted the bomb is there," said Derrick de Kerckhove, acting director of the McLuhan program in Culture and Technology. "It's about time we had something to bring us together."

De Kerckhove's point is that the bomb provides us with a universal myth of imminent apocalypse, as powerful in its way as the myth of Judgment Day was in medieval times. Religion, he says, has lost its force: it is hard today to put much faith in the relics of saints, bits of the True Cross, and such. Skepticism has triumphed even among the faithful. But the bomb is real and unanswerable. "You can't do what you want with the bomb," he says. "The bomb does what it wants with you." We used to feel that way about God — but the existence of God is a debatable concept these days; that of the bomb is not.

The shared myth of impending doom has, he argues, caused physical changes in the way our brains work.

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The traumatic prospect of collective suicide is goading us onward to the next evolutionary state. The more bombs, he says, the better. He would like to see missiles deployed all over Europe and regrets that warheads are not widely distributed in public places, such as markets.

Crazy? I don't think so. Stimulating, provocative, intellectually exciting? Yes, definitely. A true science-fictional insight into reality? Of course. But it didn't come from a science-fiction writer.

Too bad. Any fumblefingered hack can slap together a dreary tract designed to prove that a thermonuclear war is going to be a bummer. It takes a genuine thinker to see the bomb as the central myth of our time, God and Satan wrapped in one package. Worship it in the marketplace? Place shining atomic-nucleus models atop the new churches of the Holy Holocaust? Now, *that's* the stuff of science fiction! Why isn't more of it, I wonder, coming from today's science-fiction writers? ✂



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BOOK REVIEWS

by Robert Coulson

Worlds Beyond: The Art of Chesley Bonestell
by Ron Miller and
Frederick C. Durant III
Starblaze, $14.95 (trade paperback)

For those readers like myself, who came to science fiction in the late 1940s or early 1950s, Chesley Bonestell is *the* astronomical artist, and people such as Miller, Hardy, Egge, Mel Hunter (anyone remember Mel Hunter?), Dollens, and others pale in comparison. In fact, for me Bonestell was the ultimate science-fiction artist, as Hubert Rogers was for an earlier generation of fans, and Frank R. Paul for a still earlier one. This book includes almost the full spectrum of Bonestell's art; not only the astronomicals but seascapes, architectural paintings and drawings, religious paintings, some of his movie work, and one portrait. About the only type left out is his military art. (I've been assured by the Navy Department that his painting of the landing on Iwo Jima is the only one in that category. It's reprinted in the June-July 1981 issue of *American Heritage*, if you want to look it up.) The book uses heavy, slick paper, and the color work is excellent. Some of the paintings which originally appeared in *Life*, *Ladies Home Journal* (yes, they did), and others are reduced in size here, but better paper and color more than compensate for size.

There is a biography of Bonestell by Durant, and appreciations of him by various artists and writers. All interesting, but the main thing is the art; his "Surface of Venus" or any of the "Saturn from Titan" paintings are worth the price of the book. His few works which show people demonstrate why he didn't do them very often, but with those magnificent astronomicals, who cares? His painting of the Mission San Francisco de Asis is also marvelous, and not as well known to science-fiction readers.

Witches
ed. by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles Waugh
Signet, $3.50 (paper)

A thick collection, selling for about a penny a page, and including several novelets and short novels. The classics are here, of course: the original novelet of James Schmitz's "The Witches of Karres," about a bumbling spaceman and a planet of witches and possibly the best thing Schmitz has done; "Wizard's World," by Andre Norton, one of her romances of a misfit who finds a home in another world; "Operation Salamander," one of Poul Anderson's stories about the future-world adventures of a witch and a werewolf; "The Ipswich Phial," one of Randall Garrett's series of detective stories laid in an alternate world where magic works; A. E. van Vogt's "The Witch,"

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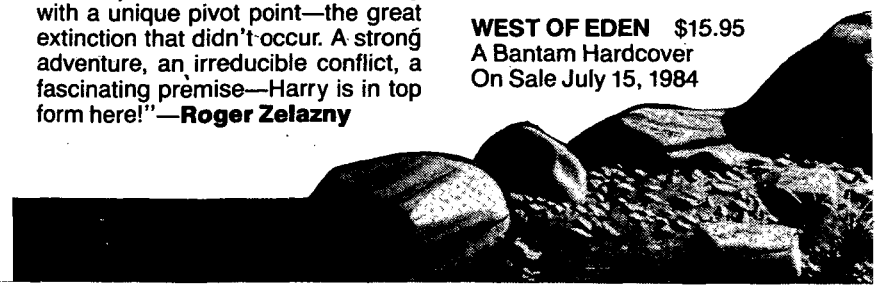
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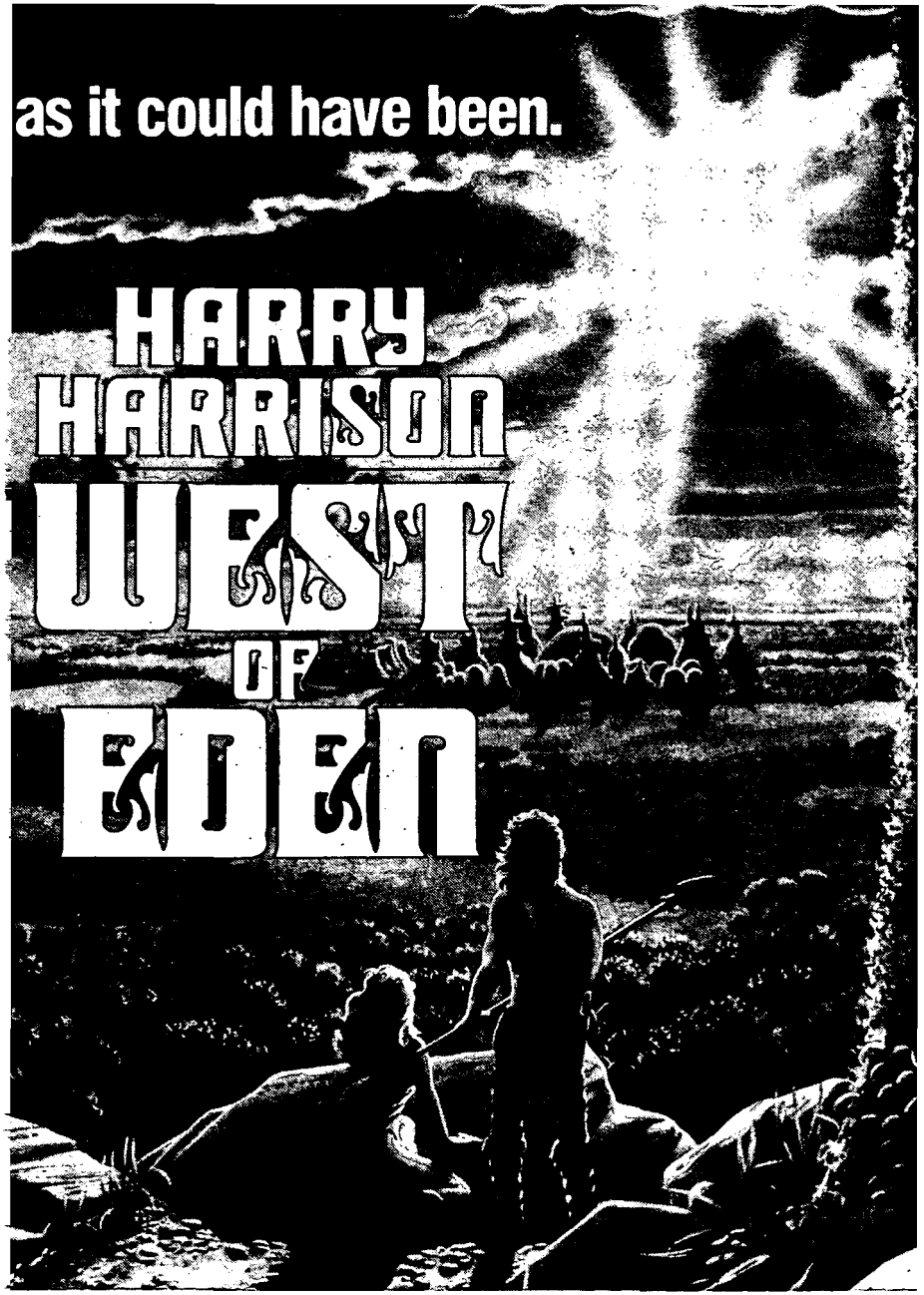
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about a "witch" who switches bodies; and "Sweets to the Sweet," a short story by Robert Bloch about a sweet little girl with a very nasty imagination and even nastier powers. There are also several lesser-known stories (lesser-known to me, anyway): William Tenn's "My Mother Was a Witch," which can be considered fantasy or not, depending on how you react to the story (either way it's an excellent work); "A Message from Charity," by William Lee, concerning a girl accused of witchcraft because she talks to a boy from the future; "Spree," by Barry Malzberg, which I hope is a parody of the current fad for psychological jargon and significance (but I wouldn't count on it); "Devil's Henchman," by Murray Leinster, reading a bit like a mediocre imitation of Manly Wade Wellman; "Malice in Wonderland," by Rufus King, an interesting story of murder and accusations of witchcraft but not a fantasy; "Poor Little Saturday," by Madeleine L'Engle, a fascinating account of a girl who discovers wonder in a small country town; "Squeakie's First Case," by Margaret Manners, the sort of frothy murder story that the slick magazines published in the 1950s (though this one actually comes from a 1943 *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*); and "Black Heart and White Heart," an H. Rider Haggard novelet of Africa, with a touch of prophecy enlivening an adventure story. Interestingly enough for one written in that era, the African is the hero and the white man the villain. Overall it's an excellent anthology despite a couple of stories that don't belong in it, and worthwhile to anyone who hasn't already read the more often reprinted stories.

The Mutants Are Coming
by Isidore Haiblum
Doubleday, $11.95 (hardcover)

A light and moderately amusing novel of a future where we've progressed to having a Moon Base and even more convoluted politics than we have now, if possible. The plot can't be taken seriously, and the solution is pretty doubtful as well, but there is a lot of fun along the way. It reads a lot like a good Ron Goulart novel, with a slightly different pattern of patter.

Wonder's Child
by Jack Williamson
Bluejay, $15.95 (hardcover)

There is also a $40 collector's edition, if any are left by the time this review sees print.

This is Jack Williamson's autobiography, and an interesting account of a different way of life. The Williamson family trek from Texas to New Mexico in a covered wagon when Jack was seven years old has been mentioned elsewhere; the fact that the family — parents and three children — lived in a one-room 10 × 12 shack after they arrived was new to me. (And Juanita and I just bought a three-story house for the two for us; talk about the affluent society!) I found the sections of the book up through World War II the most interesting, as records of a different lifestyle. Jack seems a bit defensive about his late-blooming sex life, but I think that's a reaction to the present culture. His experiences weren't that unusual at that time — and still aren't as unusual as the popular magazines would have you believe. Probably most readers will prefer the references to Jack's writing career, which spans both the pulp era with its half-cent per word markets (and those payments sometimes collected only with the aid of a lawyer) and the present day (which isn't all that much different, come to think of it). He doesn't actu-

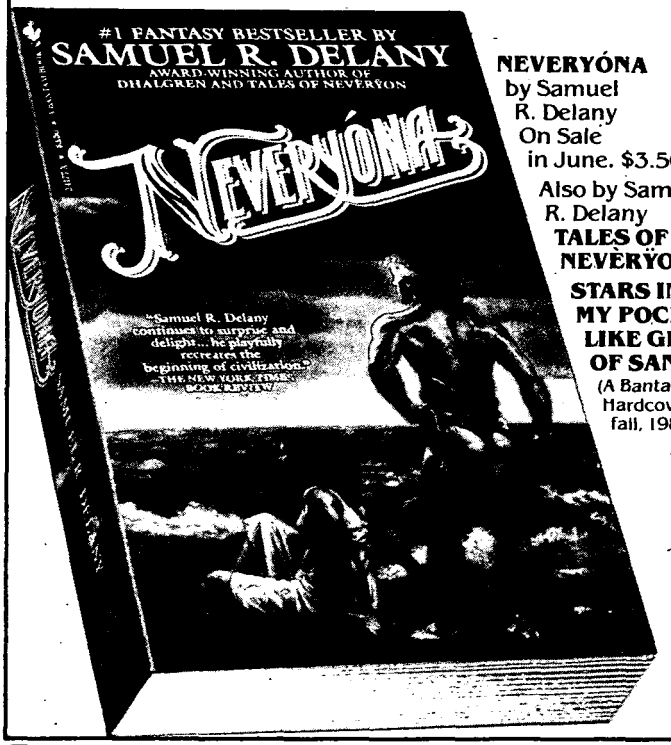
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ally tell a lot about his writing methods, but what he does tell is pertinent. From World War II on, the account is mostly a long series of separate images, as though the author was in a hurry or running out of room. I'm glad to see this one appear; Williamson is an important part of the evolution of science fiction, and played a major part in gaining academic acceptance for it.

Hit or Myth
by Robert Asprin
Starblaze, $6.95 (trade paperback)

Further adventures of Skeeve and Aahz — mostly of Skeeve, this time. This is a skinnier volume than the earlier books in the series. The humorous invention is beginning to run down, too; though it remains one of the bright spots in the fantasy field, it's not as brilliant as the series was to begin with. This time Skeeve grows up a bit and manages to stay one jump ahead of disaster without much aid from his mentor. His problems include a fantasy version of The Mob (headed, of course, by a fairy godfather); the wealthy warrior Queen Hemlock; and a king who shows remarkable good sense by running out on his planned marriage to the aforesaid Hemlock, leaving Skeeve holding the bag. I appreciate books which don't take themselves or the fantasy field too seriously; this one is recommended.

The Ghost Light
by Fritz Leiber
Berkley, $7.95 (trade paperback)

A collection of good stories, this includes "Coming Attraction," "A Deskful of Girls," "Spacetime for Springers," "Four Ghosts in Hamlet," "Gonna Roll the Bones," "Bazaar of the Bizarre," "Midnight by the Morphy Watch," and "Black Glass," plus the title story — which is original for this book — an author's introduction, and a hundred-page autobiography which takes up the last third of the book. Each story is illustrated, though I can't say the illustrations are any asset. The stories cover several areas of fantasy: ghosts, witches, alien gods, a magic watch, a couple of unpleasant futures, and an intelligent cat. One of my friends was so taken with "Spacetime for Springers" that she named her own cat Gummitch, and her kitten grew up to become president of the local science-fiction club. Which is not quite the same as growing up to be human, of course, but is at least a mark of distinction. I'd have preferred "A Pail of Air" to one or two of the stories included, but these are all readable. As is the autobiography, though I'm just as happy the latter wasn't longer. Near the end, Leiber says that he needs to break it off before it becomes unbearably coy — I'm afraid he didn't quite make it. Still, cutesy or not, anyone who has been a Shakespearean actor, a practicing minister, *and* a fantasy writer has things of interest to tell. (Of course, I've managed two of the three; but my ministerial credentials are not as orthodox as Leiber's.) An excellent book, despite the artwork.

The Golden Grove
by Nancy Kress
Bluejay, $13.95 (hardcover)

A study in fanaticism. Everyone in here is fanatical about one thing or another. Protagonist is Arachne: not the Athenian maid literally turned into a spider, but a spinner of wondrous spider-silk and the descendant of a short line of rulers who worship at the Grove, the home of the spiders. The Grove and the spiders and the magical stone from which the spiders come

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dominate all the characters, and the Grove is dying. Arachne's brother Jaen wants to merge science and religion by taking the spider-stone to Thera to see if the savants there can restore it. Arachne is the traditionalist: nothing must change, even if it already has. Adding to the tangle of cross-purposes are Arachne's husband, who wants more of her attention; her daughter, who wants to grow up; and a Theran trader who wants the spider silk and doesn't much care how he gets it. Together, of course, they bring disaster. The fantasy elements aren't really necessary to the plot; it could be any story about a group of obsessed people. These just happen to be obsessed about spiders. I didn't care much for it, but if you like studies of emotion it's quite well done.

The Man In The Tree
by Damon Knight
Berkley, $2.75 (paper)

Knight has created a Jesus for the modern world here. His protagonist is a giant, physically, mentally, and spiritually. He also has mental powers; he learns to create and heal by reaching into another world and bringing out whatever is needed. This, of course, makes him a thief: he's stealing from an alternate world to help this one. I assume this is one of Knight's subtle points; it's certainly not mentioned. Since the hero apparently doesn't notice the problem, maybe the point is that nobody's perfect. By the time the reader figures all this out, the ending is obvious — except Knight uses a different ending. It's not really satisfactory, but at least it's original. I certainly got no revelations from the book, but it's modestly entertaining.

A Mirror For Observers
by Edgar Pangborn
Bluejay, $5.95 (trade paperback)

One of Pangborn's better books, and he never wrote a bad one. It was originally published in 1954; it's a story of a Martian Observer living among humans, and of love and disaster, of emotional disputes between humans and between Martians; and if you haven't read it, go buy a copy.

The Wild Shore
by Kim Stanley Robinson
Ace, $2.95 (paperback)

This is the first in a new line of Ace Specials. In Terry Carr's introduction, he complains about "skilled rehashings of plots and ideas that have been popular in the past" and then gives us a novel that's a new twist on an idea that wasn't new when George R. Stewart wrote it in 1949. Still, the background is different from all the other devastated Americas; and Henry is different from all the other young-men-coming-of-age, the other characters are well drawn, and if the plot isn't exactly exciting, it's interesting. Not a great book, but above average.

Cold Iron
by Leslie Fish
Off Centaur Publications,
P.O. Box 424, El Cerito, CA 94530
$9.00 (cassette tape)
Horse-Tamer's Daughter
by Julia Ecklar
Off Centaur Publications,
$9.00 (cassette tape)

Cold Iron consists of Kipling poems, set to music by Leslie. These are mostly the more "barbaric" items: verse about Romans, natives, early British history, the title song, "The Runes on Weland's Sword," "Puck's Song," and my favorite of the lot, "Rimmon." They make fine rousing ballads, and Leslie's voice is absolutely right for all sixteen of the songs

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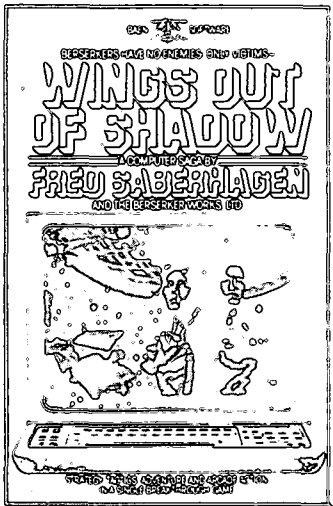
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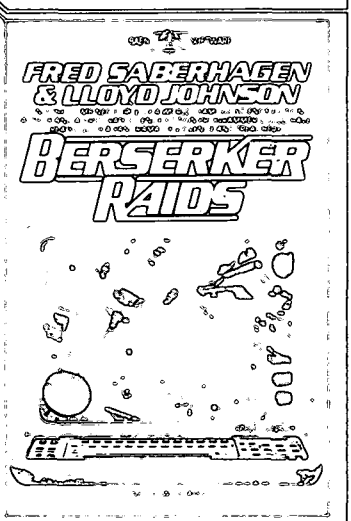
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included here.

Julia's material is science-fictional. The title song is a 13-minute-long ballad based on the Darkover series, "The Bait" is a unicorn hunt gone wrong, "Laughter From The Loch" is a sneer from Nessie, and the others are fantasy or space-faring songs — except for "Black Widows In The Privy," which is cheerfully murderous but not fantasy. Julia's voice is absolutely right for these, or for anything else she wants to sing. Both tapes are 60 minutes long; both are recommended.

Daughter of Regals
by Stephen R. Donaldson
Del Rey, $14.95 (hardcover)

A collection of shorter works. The title story is a long novelet of scheming for the throne, with lots of color, action, intricate plotting, and a deus ex machina ending. The other original story, "Ser Visal's ~~Tale~~," is a fairly straight novelet of witchcraft and . . . romance? Quite well done. "Gilden-Fire," previously published only by a small press, is a story intended for *The Illearth War* and cut from the published version because a reduction in wordage was required and this episode wasn't vital to the plot. Of the other stories, "Mythological Beast" is about a very reluctant rebellion against a sterile society; "The Lady In White" is the lure and wonder of the unknown, "Animal Lover" is essentially a mad-scientist story, though again there is a brutal society and a government agent with moral qualms about what he does. "Unworthy of the Angel" is a direct tale of sacrifice and redemption, originally published in a religious anthology. "The Conqueror Worm" is a horror story. I didn't feel any horror — I seldom do — but it's unpleasant enough. All of Donaldson's societies and all but a few of his characters are remarkably unpleasant, which is why I generally dislike his writing. But this book I enjoyed; perhaps I am more readily able to accept such nasty characters in small doses.

by Frank Catalano

There's a danger in being a reviewer for too long. Instead of sitting quietly at home, reading what comes in and writing an evaluation of it, it all too often happens that a reviewer gets an urge, sometimes uncontrollable, to comment on the arranger of those words.

Let's label it Author's Headache #342: Reviewer Oversteps Bounds of Propriety.

A prime example is in comparing one author to another, even though it may be comparing apples and oranges. Recently, another reviewer, who mercifully will go unnamed but not ignored, made an interesting observation. Why is it, that reviewer mused, that Female Writer Apple writes nothing like Female Writer Orange? After all, they're both women.

Sure. I've always wondered why Brian W. Aldiss writes nothing like Harlan Ellison. After all, they're both men.

This charming little hypothesis that women, simply by being women, must write words that are put together in a similar way gives me the impression that the unnamed reviewer, and those who think along the same lines, would make a killing as romance novel

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packagers.

It's bad enough that a good-sized chunk of the rest of the world seems to think that women can't be allowed the diversity men are allowed. One would hope a forward-thinking field like ours could at least be a little more enlightened.

If we have to deal in apples and oranges, the least we can do is make a fruit salad out of them.

The Adversary
by Julian May
Houghton Mifflin, $15.95 (cloth)

Back in 1981 Julian May wrote the very well received novel, *The Many-Colored Land.* As volume 1 of *THE SAGA OF PLIOCENE EXILE,* it detailed a Galactic Milieu with alien races intervening in Earth's affairs. But not everyone could handle a benevolent, ordered Milieu, complete with psychics who were actively being developed. So they were the ones who went to France, and entered a time-gate for a one-way trip to Pliocene Europe, when things were supposed to be simpler.

Unfortunately for them, they landed right in the middle of a colonization project of two warring, psychic races from, as the saying goes, a galaxy far, far away.

The Adversary wraps up May's *SAGA* and follows the human King, who finally meets the gentleman who began a rebellion against the Milieu, then escaped — defeated — with his remaining forces through the time-gate and across to Pliocene North America. The rebel leader is adamantly opposed to a plan the kids of the rebels have come up with: bored with the Pliocene, they want to go back to the Milieu through a time-gate they plan to build on their side.

Oh, and the two warring races from that other galaxy, the Tanu and Firvulag, see the signs of conflict between the rebel leader and the human King as an indication that they will soon fight their final battle. And possibly wipe out both sides.

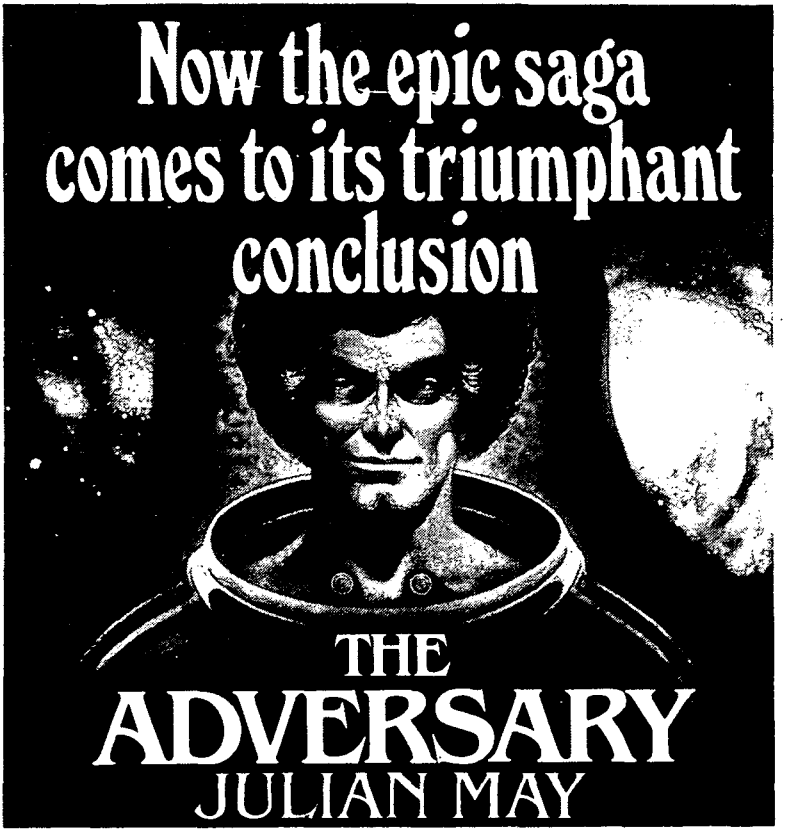
If it weren't already obvious, May's *SAGA* is labyrinthine in its plotting and politics; as a matter of fact, it's as much a novel of political maneuverings involving the human, Tanu, and Firvulag factions as anything else. That's perhaps its greatest strength, and maybe its greatest weakness. Throughout all four books May does a good job of keeping you wondering what's going to happen next. But, at the same time, there are so many characters to keep track of — and so many of those *major* characters — that it's tough to follow who's done what to whom at each step along the way.

The Adversary suffers the least of the four books from the memory-busting. And that, I think, is why the fourth novel is also the best in terms of characterization. To be blunt, enough of the characters are either dead or out of the picture so that the remaining characters can be more fully developed, and the reader can *care* more about how those individuals fare. Admittedly, some of my favorite characters were offed early in the going, but May comes back with a very driven "villain," Marc Remillard of the aforementioned Rebellion and the Adversary of the title. He's memorable in a way that most good villains are — he truly believes he's doing the right thing for all concerned, to the point that you may even agree with him.

May also throws in some nice hints about the Rebellion itself and what caused it to go wrong. Not that she plans to keep any of us in suspense — three more novels are planned in this cycle, all dealing with the alien inter-

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vention and Rebellion six million years in the future of the *SAGA* books.

But *The Adversary* as the capstone to *THE SAGA OF PLIOCENE EXILE* finishes the initial series off nicely — the myriad loose ends are drawn together, and a tantalizing hint of what's to come is dropped.

An Image of Voices
Flexing the Warp
Fize of the Gabriel Ratchets
Planet of Flowers
by Warren Norwood
Bantam, $2.50 each (paper)

I wish I could be as positive about the cohesiveness of Warren Norwood's four books that make up *THE WINDHOVER TAPES* as I am about how well *THE SAGA OF PLIOCENE EXILE* holds together. Maybe something is lost when you read all the volumes in a series at once; you don't have the expectation of waiting for the next one to come out and the memory-soothing balm of time to heal any warts you may have noticed in the previous books.

THE WINDHOVER TAPES series starts out promisingly enough. In *An Image of Voices*, we're introduced to one Gerard Manley, contract diplomat for the Federation, and his sassy starship Windhover. As Manley goes from diplomatic episode to episode on various worlds, he starts to recover — through dreams — bits and pieces of a past lost to him. All he knows is that a number of years of his life were spent in his previous mission and that the Fed mindwiped him afterwards, as is their option.

Both *An Image of Voices* and *Flexing the Warp* are written in the first person, in a "Dear Diary" form that I found irritating when I realized that all the real action was taking place off stage; but Norwood handles that limitation very well and uses it to get into the mind of Manley. The diplomatic messes and successes are entertaining, and Manley's attempts to regain his memory — heck, I can't really find serious fault with either of the first two volumes. They read like two halves of the same book, with a nice pause at the end of the first.

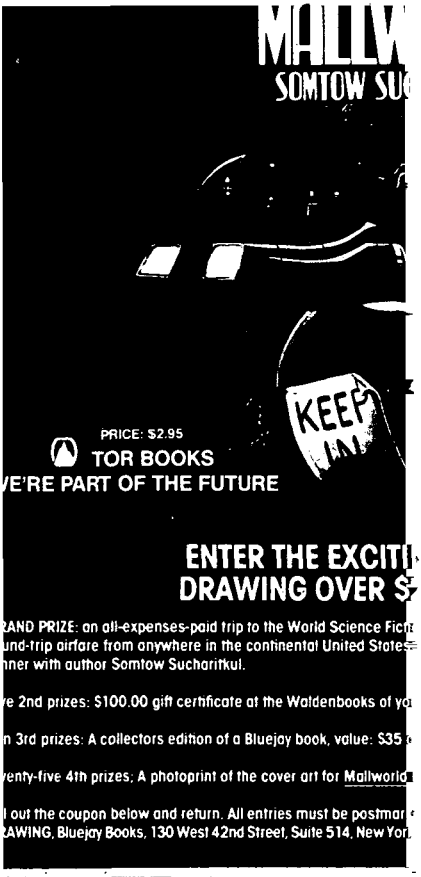
But here's where I started to worry: *Fize of the Gabriel Ratchets*. As book three, I expected it to pick up where the first two left off. Instead, it actually is the chronicle of what Manley is trying to remember: his previous mission. And I was jarred by the fact that this volume is in the third person. Still, it's a well-written, competent adventure story — if you can deal with already knowing what comes next.

So, in the first three books, we're given the mystery, the solution, and where the character is now. Next the character puts it all together, challenges his old foes, and lives happily ever after, right?

Um, no. You see, Manley and company, still in the third person, pick up time-wise after the second book. And they travel to the Planet of Flowers of the novel's name. And they have this lovely adventure with these pretty, intelligent flower colonies that a crazy wants to kill and that some immortals are divided over protecting, since one of the immortals wants to use Manley for his own end; and, dammitall, it just sort of peters out.

To Norwood's credit, he brings in a couple of sets of characters and plot items he'd only hinted at or used differently in the previous books, giving it a fleshed-out feel. Even the story within the book itself isn't bad. But taken in context with the rest of the series, it doesn't live up to the expectations it creates — that Manley will face his accusers and right the

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wrong. To top it all off, Norwood does something at the end of the novel that I feel, frankly, is cheating, but to mention it here would ruin the books for any of you who still want to read them.

I may be placing my own misguided expectations on these novels and making Norwood the scapegoat; but I get the impression I was driving down a straight, solid, four-lane highway in the first two books — which doubled back in the third, and then inexplicably turned into a winding dirt road in the fourth that left me 90 degrees away from where I wanted to go.

Earth Song
by Sharon Webb
Bantam, $2.50 (paper)

Now let me say something nice about the direction a series is taking. Sharon Webb's *Earth Song* is the second book in the *EARTH SONG TRIAD*, picking up where the very promising *Earthchild* left off. Back in my first column for *Amazing®* nearly two years ago, I chided Webb for simply letting everything hang unresolved at the end of *Earthchild*, not knowing when I wrote the column that it was the first book of a trilogy. Such is the treacherous path a reviewer walks.

But *Earth Song*, while still not a complex novel in terms of plot, is a much fuller one that *Earthchild*. That is to say it stands on its own, the characters grow, and it's still as good and promising a read as the first book.

By way of background, humanity got immortality force-fed to it through the Mouat-Gari process — and it only affected prepubescent kids. But one of those kids, Kurt Kraus, eventually became a world leader, and found the absence of imminent death was killing creativity. *Earth Song* follows David Defour, one of a group of creative kids in a project Kraus has begun. Defour has to choose between living seemingly forever with the process — or living a brief life fueled by the spark of creativity.

Earth Song does suffer a bit from not making its central threat seem really, personally threatening. But, as the flip side of that coin, the characters are drawn in intimate detail. It's a good second novel that builds on the first, paving the way for what could be a fine trilogy.

The Branch
by Mike Resnick
Signet, $2.50 (paper)

If you enjoy a solid, entertaining read with an unusual theological twist thrown in, *The Branch* by Mike Resnick is it. Resnick deftly plots his way through the tale in a straightforward way, and it's seamless.

The Branch is the story of two seedy characters: Solomon Mundy Moore, the kingpin of crime in a future Chicago, and a cheeky down-and-outer known only as Jeremiah the B. Jeremiah the B wants Moore's outfit and, despite overwhelming odds against him, seems to take everything Moore can dish out. Then, Moore realizes that there may be more to his antagonist than either he or Jeremiah figure.

While neither main character is anyone I'd want as a close friend, Resnick does a good job of making the hero of this piece sympathetic; at least he earns your respect. Resnick has written a novel that's as compelling as it is entertaining.

The Practice Effect
by David Brin
Bantam, $2.75 (paper)

Don't read David Brin's *The Prac-*

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tice Effect if you're expecting carefully, complexly plotted SF, in the vein of his other two novels, *Sundiver* and *Startide Rising*. But if you like a fantasy romp much in the vein of Piers Anthony or L. Sprague de Camp, pick it up. Odds are you'll come away satisfied.

Dennis Nuel is working on a mysterious project that seems to open on alternate realities, but there's a hitch, and Nuel volunteers to go through the portal and try to fix it from the other side. Once there, he finds a world much like Earth, with signs of high technology, but with something maddeningly out of line with what he expects. Then he winds up mixed up trying to rescue a princess from an evil baron . . . all while puzzling out the world, and figuring out how to get home.

Brin handles the traditional fantasy element of rescuing the princess ably enough while intermingling it with physics. I couldn't quite follow the explanation Nuel finally gives out at the end of novel of what's different about the world, for I felt that something was left out; and indeed, Brin has given himself room for a sequel. But *The Practice Effect* is fun; I get the impression that was the intent, anyway.

Clay's Ark
by Octavia E. Butler
St. Martin's Press, $15.95 (cloth)

In *Clay's Ark* a starship, the first, has crashed; but everyone on Earth thinks it was destroyed and its crew all dead. Earth itself has begun to revert to barbarism, with only armored cars driving the highways that roll through desolation. But one crew member has survived, if you can call it that; he's survived the infection of a unique alien organism. And while it compels him to live, he has to keep it from spreading.

That's the premise; and it's enough to say that where other writers use too many words, Octavia E. Butler keeps it lean. Where others let side-trips get in the way of the story, Butler keeps the pacing tight.

Actually, about the only flaw I can see with the novel is that I really would like to know what happens after it ends. But that's probably not a real flaw, but a wish for more. *Clay's Ark* is a complete novel — spare, thought-provoking, entertaining, haunting, and a page-turner.

The Armageddon Rag
by George R. R. Martin
Poseidon Press, $15.95 (cloth)

The Armageddon Rag isn't SF and it isn't really fantasy and, despite elements of the horror *genre*, it doesn't seem to be a horror novel. But George R. R. Martin has written a damn fine novel, nonetheless.

Imagine a hot rock group, real hot, called the Nazgul. At the height of their success at a huge concert, their charismatic lead singer is assassinated by a sniper's bullet. Years later, the ex-manager of the Nazgul is bizarrely murdered — and former underground newspaper writer Sandy Blair, now a frustrated novelist, is called in to write about it, finding bit-by-bit ties to the now-disbanded Nazgul and to his own past in the '60s. And then he gets sucked into something that wants to bring it all together.

Martin's genius at creating characters and scenes that stick with you after you put the book down is amply evident in *The Armageddon Rag*. It may not fit into a category, but anyone who remembers the '60s and its music fondly or who enjoys a contemporary novel with undertones of the supernatural likely won't regret picking this one up. ✂

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DISCUSSIONS

by the Readers

Dear *Amazing®*,

After seeing the announcement of another *Jedi* review on the cover of the March edition of your magazine, I expected to see a generally good-natured one to counter Alan Dean Foster's in the previous issue. But when I started reading the article I found that it was simply another excuse for someone else to whip out their verbal chainsaw and hack to pieces the *STAR WARS* mythos. From such a fine publication as yours, I really expected more. And as a tried and true *STAR WARS* fanatic I feel I must jump to the rescue.

As is evident to anyone who has read anything concerning *Jedi*, the two most controversial points are Leia being revealed as Luke's sister and Vader his father. If you look closely, however, you will see that not only do these relationships make sense, but they were foreshadowed in the two previous movies.

Leia being Luke's sister was the only way to bring to a close the Luke-Leia-Han love triangle without leaving any of the characters out in the cold.

It seems to me that throughout the trilogy Leia has felt an attraction to Han and affection, or "sisterly love" if you wish, for Luke. In *Star Wars*, she kisses Luke "for luck" and, in *Empire*, to spite Han. But she winks at Han when giving him his medal and is afraid to admit her true feelings for him. And in *Empire*, it was Leia who Luke contacted telepathically, not Chewie or Lando. Perhaps his Jedi instincts had recognized her as his sister (it probably wasn't a conscious action). Yes, it is quite obvious that her love for both Han and Luke runs deep, but in different directions.

Yes, in *Star Wars*, Vader didn't give two hoots about Luke and didn't recognize him as his son, and was obviously trying to kill him. But you must remember that it wasn't until Luke began training under Yoda that his powers became a threat to the Empire. There was no "tremor in the Force" before then. In *Empire*, Vader realized that it would be more profitable to turn Luke than to kill him and was only then cognizant that he was his father. You must also remember Vader found out about Leia by reading Luke's mind (no "tremors in the Force" this time). It would be logical to believe that before sending Leia off, Ben or some other Jedi would have erected psychic shields or some such to protect her from Vader. They wouldn't send her off without making sure that she would be safe.

It is obvious that Algis Budrys does not grasp the meaning of the *STAR WARS* trilogy. He epitomizes this by his profound question: "Why did the story [*Empire*] open on an ice planet?" His query could be answered "Why not," but that would be cheating. The

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answer is to provide an exotic setting for a beautiful story about friendship and love. The *STAR WARS* story does not take a back seat to the special effects, as was implied. They are simply part of the magic of *STAR WARS* (I suppose if there weren't many special effects you'd get complaints. Oh, well, I guess you can't please everybody). If we have to go around justifying every part of a story, however, then there is no sense in seeing the movie.

If this is really to be the last *STAR WARS* movie, as some have predicted, then I hope George Lucas, Irwin Kershner, Richard Marquand, and everyone else who worked on *STAR WARS* can sleep at night knowing that they've made millions of people happy and added a new dimension to their lives.

As for Algis Budrys, well, I suppose everyone has the right to his own opinion, but let it be known that his is in the minority. I only wish that next issue you will print a favorable review of *Return of the Jedi*. May the Force be with you.

Sincerely,
Thomas W. Zarzecki
Scranton PA

It may be logical to believe that before sending Leia off, Ben or some other Jedi would have erected psychic shields or some such to protect her from Vader . . . but a movie exists to show *that such did occur, and why, and how. Magic aside, a story is still a story.*

And the willing suspension of disbelief is not necessarily the next man's or woman's willing suspension of disbelief. No doubt, we have all been enthralled enough by some movie sometime that we were only too glad to fill in the missing pieces and read into vague moments what must seem right (to us).

We must point out one thing, though. We don't order reviews, or reviewers, to come up with alternatingly "pro" or "con" opinions. The nature of the universe being what it is, we trust our readers will take in the slack right here — in the "Discussions" column. Do write, letting us know what you *liked, or disliked, or where you felt another opinion needed to be heard. We appreciate the chance to hear your ideas.*

— George Scithers

Dear George:

In the recent *Amazing®* for May
the story by Somtow, I'd say
is a sequel by Barrie
of Homer and very
indebted to Graves and del Rey.
Sincerely,

X

Joe (his mark) Mayhew
Greenbelt MD

We couldn't agree with you more
but the copyright office is for
resolving disputes
of authors' reputes
and Somtow is versed in their lore.

— John Sevcik

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I suppose I got the November '83 issue of *Amazing® SF* because I'm a voting SFWAn. I thought at first my subscription had started (not yet, I guess).

Maybe this is a stupid thing to tell an editor to whom you eventually wish to sell stories, but I could barely read through Bruce Bethke's "Cyberpunk." Choked on all that cute jargon, I fear. If this is your taste in humor, we must have different tastes indeed. It just

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didn't work for me. And I think if I read one more "computer whizkid" story, I'm going to electrocute the next computer I see. I've seen too many variations on a trendy theme recently, and in magazines I respect. *Omni.* Yours.

The rest of the issue was interesting, particularly the Silverberg story. *That* was unusual. I'm impatient with a lot of current science fiction, but this one really held up. The cover art, also, was unusual, good, not the overdone all-alike clone style seen so much.

But "Cyberpunk?" Nah.

Sincerely,
Kiel Stuart II
Stony Brook NY

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Thanks for putting out such a great (January) issue! About three times a day over the last week I found myself looking for that "new Pohl novel" I've been reading, only to remember, in the middle of my search, that I found it in the pages of *Amazing®*. I can hardly wait to get my grubby little hands on the next issue to finish the story.

I like to use memory as a rough indicator of the relative worth of a story. By that standard, I'll remember "Gateway" for a long time to come. As for others, well, if I can't remember it, it can hardly have been memorable, can it? Well, it's only a rough indicator anyway: I have completely forgotten the gist of some really great stuff, only to remember it upon the reading of a few lines of the story. After only a short time, I find that I have forgotten some of the stories in this issue. I can't complain, as all the stories were of good quality. I particularly liked "Ice Age" and "The Demon Queen," not to mention the one about Mr. Feghoot, whose name, but not whose exploits, I remember from the (now distant) past.

I found "Ice Age" particularly intriguing, and particularly annoying as well, as it is similar to a story idea I once had, but forgot to do anything about when something else came up. Next time, I shall have to work out my idea before anything else comes along.

I also enjoyed Mr. Silverberg's column. I remember agreeing with him when I read what he said about trilogies in March of 1982. There *are* an awful lot of multi-volume works out there; but some of them are good and some have reason to be multi-volume works; and besides, I've read some of them. Some of them are just exploitative, but I've no doubt that Mr. Silverberg's (first) is not one of them.

I have always had the feeling (well, for some time at least) that I had read "Lord Valentine's Castle," but on reading Mr. Silverberg's description of it, I realized that that's not so. I shall remember to get a hold of a copy of it.

Finally, I wanted to ask: According to Kim Mohan, in "Observatory" in the July 1983 issue, the "Zoo" is in Philadelphia. Why, therefore, can I not find a Philadelphia address in *Amazing®*? Suppose I want to send a manuscript for your perusal? Could it be that this "Philadelphia" place is really a back room in Lake Geneva and not in Pennsylvania as I've always suspected?

Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,
Steven C. Martin
3018 Greenwood Crc.
Colorado Springs CO 80910

Well, about that Philadelphia address — no, it isn't a back room in Lake Geneva. We've been careful about publishing our address in Philadelphia (which is PO Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243), because we do NOT *want the Philadelphia*

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address to get into reference books and the like. (We're still having to have Elinor Mavor and Arthur Bernhard forward material from the Arizona address.) So please treat the Philadelphia address as one that's good only so long as we keep mentioning it in the magazine.

In any event, all letters and manuscripts sent to Lake Geneva (where others of us also read your comments) do get sent to me, where we peruse most of them personally.

— George Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers,

About three weeks ago I sent you a forgettable vignette entitled "The Escape." I don't expect you to remember it, I realize you receive hundreds of stories a week. I also know that the story was probably read by an associate editor, as is, more than likely this letter. That's not important. What is important, is that you (somebody?) took the time to underline why the story was rejected and even included a hand-written note, of which I am enclosing a copy.

I don't want to take up your time, but I want to say thank you for sending this back with the criticism. I've been writing for almost a year now and never has anyone explained why my work was rejected much less written anything on the rejection slip. You provided a much needed lift by your thoughtfulness with this rejection.

Again, thank you! I really appreciate it . . . your note came at just the right time!

Sincerely,
Bernard Wingerter

All editors, and all editorial staffs, must have specific reasons for not buying some stories, and specific reasons for buying others. We know what they are (speaking for all editors here), but what good is our knowledge if it doesn't reach the writer? And there is always the matter of how much future work we save ourselves.

For instance, we'd rather point out to a writer of modern scene horror stories that Amazing® *only publishes SF and fantasy, thereby saving ourselves the added work of considering four or five* more *modern scene horror stories from that author over the coming months.*

Which brings us to an important notion: writers must read, and they must read their intended markets, too.

— George Scithers

Dear George,

Thanks to your advice I picked up a copy of *Amazing®* this week. Granted it was the May issue and it was at a second-hand book store. However, my subscription is enclosed and second-hand copies will no longer be an issue. I grew up reading SF extensively, but over the years I subscribed to only one magazine that began with the letter "A." Part of my early attachment to that magazine and SF was the art of Frank Kelly Freas. Well, who happened to be on the May *Amazing®* cover? you guessed it.

I'm not one of your readers who has been a fan since 1926, read the magazine during World War II in the South Pacific, and kept every back issue under my bed. In fact, he said in a confessional tone of voice, "I've never read *Amazing®* before the May, 1983 issue!" Gasps could be heard throughout the SF Fandom. The magazine was refreshing, bright and had a sense of youth. I'm planning on starting my *Amazing®* tradition with my first issue in the mail. Thank you for the memories.

Clyde Miller
Raytown MO

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*Yes, but interspersed between the gasps you might be able to hear a hurray or two (HOORAY! **HURRAH!**). And you're absolutely right that second-hand copies are no longer an issue — they're a collection.*
— George Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers:

No doubt this is my own lapse; you must have had your correspondence address somewhere. If not, and if you really want correspondence, why not give the address clearly in your "Discussions" department, at head or tail? I had to guess the one I used from the masthead.

I wish only to make a brief dissent from Brian Doherty's letter in the Sept. '83 issue, about *Amazing®* under you seeming at times only an improved re-edit of *Asimov's*. The latter magazine delighted me at first, since who could not fail to appreciate a new, market-oriented SF magazine that actually succeeded? But I'm an ancient 40, and I guess *Asimov's* did begin to pall after a while. Editorial policy? Catch a new audience . . . "Ageism," I cry; well, it succeeded.

Old fogey speaking here. Still, during this time Mavor was actually making a magazine go. Spinning out strange things from Arizona, for God's sake, and barely not starving. So I subscribed to the maximum subscription — four years, I think — on the theory that advertisers might be encouraged. I was sorry when [Arthur Bernhard, the owner] sold it, although the purchasers intrigued me: What new bent on things was coming up next?

Somewhat like Mr. Doherty, when I heard you'd come in as Chief Indian, my reaction was, "Oh, well; can't win 'em all." Unlike him, I concluded after only one issue under your control that things were likely to get interesting. And that, they did. Right away.

I like what you're doing with *Amazing®*. I like the experimentation; I sense a freedom that *Asimov's* never showed me; and I like the sense of optimism that I get from it all. A trivial example of this — um — difference: Anybody who could publish Bretnor's "Deep Song" without even an introductory comment, in *this* genre, is doing something very right indeed. (And yes, Bretnor's story was of the highest caliber. There were some others, but that one stood out.)

As a qualified old fogey: Been reading SF since 1952, when I was 9 and an eccentric old aunt introduced me to *Astounding* and *F&SF* (and, later, *Galaxy*). Now we have an age when *Galaxy* can die. It's great to see someone tweaking frontiers again, and that it's Hugo Gernsback's original, far-afield publication, revitalized, only makes it better. *Amazing®* is not *Asimov's* (which always struck me as slightly juvenile), so to Hell with those who carp and criticize. No offense, Mr. Doherty; but open your eyes and try again.

Sincerely,
Craig Menefee
Pacifica CA

We're glad people are bringing up the matter of our address, because it gives us the chance to repeat ourselves on such an important point. Letters, manuscripts, requests for writers' guidelines, or even orders for our booklet Constructing Scientifiction & Fantasy *($2.00 for one copy, 50¢ per each additional one) can be sent to the publisher's address, PO Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147-0110. That gives those of us who work in Lake Geneva a chance to also read your letters, or take your money to the bank.*

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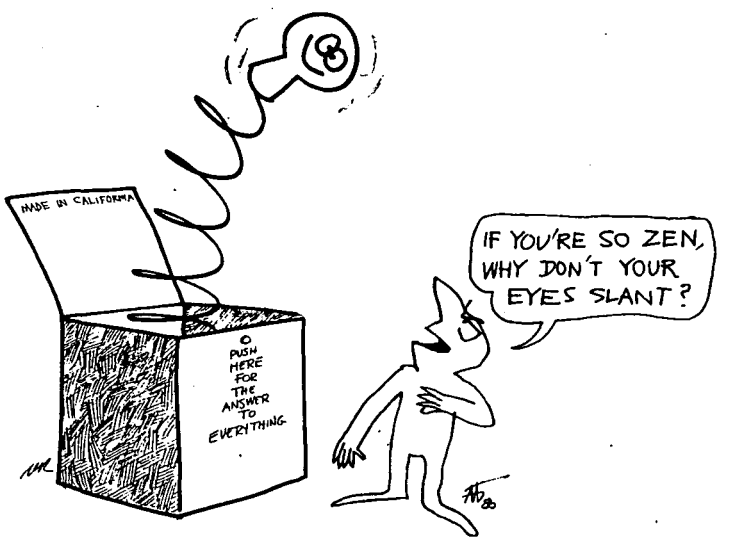
Or, if you wish, you may send manuscripts — even letters, or queries — directly to us at our Philadelphia address (which is PO Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243). But as we mentioned in the answer to another letter above, only use the Philadelphia address as long as we keep mentioning it in the magazine.

Yes, Asimov's *was less free than* Amazing® *is with story content — but that's our fault* **rather** *than any dictation of policy by the publisher over there, Joel Davis, or by Dr. Asimov himself. When we were deciding what* Asimov's *was to be, our models were* The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction *and* Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*: short-story magazines without serials, with a strong bias toward very short-short stories, and no sword & sorcery at all. In fact, we originally thought we should have no explicit fantasy at all. Juvenile? Since every poll of SF readers shows that virtually all of them started reading SF between the ages of 6 and 16 or so, SF magazines have to be accessible to teens and sub-teens, without being slanted for them.*

Here, we have the directions that Elinor Mavor and Arthur Bernhard had given the magazine: almost anything is fit subject for Amazing®*, and that freedom lets us use serials, solidly fantastic fantasy, sword & sorcery . . . though we seldom use classical horror, and we try to be careful about a few words that tend to divert attention from the story. Neither magazine, however, limits itself as to subject matter within the general bounds of what we think our readers will enjoy.*

— George Scithers ✂

CARTOON **CARTOON**



William Rotsler **Alexis Gilliland**

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THE COMET THAT CRIED FOR ITS MOTHER

by Somtow Sucharitkul

art: George Barr



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This story is set in Sucharitkul's "Inquestor" universe, which has been the subject of numerous short stories and two novels so far, Light on the Sound *and* The Throne of Madness, *both available from Timescape.*

Millennia hence, the vast array of worlds known as the Dispersal of Man is overseen by the Inquest, a semi-religious elite motivated (supposedly) by compassion to prevent stagnation of the species by destroying "utopias" and forcibly reminding mankind of its fallen state. Whole planets are destroyed and populations displaced in the course of vast games of makrugh *which no one, even the Inquestors, fully understands. Somtow has explained that the idea was to create a universe of extreme beauty and cruelty; and, while there are some similarities to Cordwainer Smith's universe of the Instrumentality, he points out that "his is* more Oriental *than mine." Perhaps an Inquestor can explain. We can't.*

. . . the child's eyes, amber-clear, deadly . . . "When I die, *hokh'Shen,* I want to be a comet."

"A comet." Shen Sajit, wrapping his kaleidokilt around his waist and readying his array of musical instruments for the second half of the concert, watched the childsoldier they had assigned to guard him: lithe, slender, the black hair matching exactly the midnight of his tunic, the short cloak thrown sharply over his shoulder at just the regulation angle, the gravi-boots, iridium-laced, glistening. "Why a comet, boy?"

"Because they experience the tumblejoy, Master Musician, when they appear in a planet's sky as harbingers of the firedeath."

"You've lost me. Things have changed since I was a boy here, a childsoldier myself, when I swapped my eyes for the killing laser-irises and learnt to inflict the whirling-death on cities. I don't know why I came back."

For a moment the childsoldier seemed to lose his reserve. "*You* were here once, you the most famous musician in the Dispersal of Man?"

"Is it strange to you that someone can survive the years of childsoldiery?"

"I have never thought of it," the boy said wistfully. "Were you really here? You must be a thousand years old."

Sajit smiled a little at this. "Almost."

"Why did you come back?"

Idly Sajit touched his old whisperlyre; the strings stole warmth from his fingers, adding it to their resonance. He looked at the room they had

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given him behind the small stage that was used for the childsoldiers' assemblies, for making announcements, for meting out punishments. It seemed little different from the grubby rooms of his childhood: first as a whore's son in Airang, then here in the childsoldiers' city, impressed by the Inquest into the trade of killing. He wished he had not come back. From the minute he had set foot on Bellares, the barrack world, he wanted to go back to Elloran's palace, to be again among beautiful things.

"I asked for a leave of absence from my Inquestor," he told the boy, "so that I could better remember certain flavors, certain smells, certain colors. I am writing a new music for him, you see." But now that he had seen he did not think he wanted to remember these things. He had not expected the years to have softened the past's ugliness so much. He wished he could tell the boy about Varezhdur the golden palace that flew from star to star through the light-mad overcosm; of the gardens within labyrinthine gardens, of the long dark corridors lined with holosculptures of weeping pteratygers that slowly flapped their wings in the wuthering artwind. But it was useless to talk of such things. Doubtless the boy would be dead in a year. Instead, he simply said, "Over there, the amplijewels — hand them to me. Here. And the belt with the buckle of mating flamefish. And . . . what is your name, boy? You've attended me three days and I'm tired of calling you *hey, boy*."

"N-narop," said the boy. Then, bursting out, "You asked my name! They never ask me my name." He looked away, embarrassed.

Sajit was dressed now. He gestured for the hovercushion to descend towards the floor; the boy Narop made to lead him by the hand. Sajit said, "No, no, I'm really *not* a thousand years old, you know." The boy shrank away, afraid of offending. For Sajit came as Inquestral envoy, and a word from him could mean instant death, just like that. Sajit knew this too well. Things weren't that different after all.

A displacement plate was set into the floor; Sajit saw a small insect crawl onto it and vanish. As he made to step out of the room he saw the boy, anxious, unsure. He beckoned him forward. I was like this once, he thought. He tried to drown out the memory in the strains of the music he was about to perform; but it kept surfacing. "What did you mean, Narop-without-a-clan," he said, "when you said you wanted to be a comet when you die?"

"You know, a comet."

"A comet comet?"

"Yes. An angel of death. You know. They build them here. I think they'll show you the factories so you can report to your Inquestor."

"Comet? Angel of death? Some new weapon then?" For he remembered no such thing, and he had thought the boy meant some pretty conceit, some childish daydream.

The boy said, smiling ingenuously, "Maybe they didn't have them in

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your time, Shen Sajit. But *we* all dream about them. If we are fierce in battle, if we are unwavering in our loyalty, they reward us after we die by making us into comets. I thought it was something they always had."

"Where is the factory?"

"By the hospice, where they take the childsoldiers to die. It all makes sense." For a moment his citrine eyes glowed like hollow fire, and Sajit was afraid. He knew that a glance and a subvocalized command was all that the boy needed to slice him in two, more cleanly than any knife. If done well there wouldn't even be much blood; the burn's intensity would cauterize the vessels. . . .

The words of the song, Sajit thought. *The homeworld of the heart . . . the homeworld of the heart. . . .* But somehow his heart wasn't in it. His mind saw vivid nightmares of war: of ships burning as they struck the atmosphere of a doomed world, of dismembered children littering the steelgray of a starship's hold. These things had all been real, real as the gold that burnished the palace of Elloran the High Inquestor; to the boy Narop they must be the only reality.

Impulsively he said, "Have you thought about . . . beyond the wars? The time after, if you survive?"

"No, Shen Sajit. I'm afraid to think such things. I don't want a clan name. I want the tumblejoy. They say that a comet feels it, that it's the finest feeling you can have."

"When they take me to see the comets, Narop-without-a-Clan," Sajit said, "will you attend me?"

The boy nodded. And the old musician clutched the whisperlyre to his chest, gasping at the sudden chill as his body heat funnelled into it and fueled its whispering resonances, and he stepped onto the plate, his eyes closed; and as he opened them he saw the clashing lights and heard the familiar murmur-roar of the crowd, and his voice came to him at last, as he knew it would.

They had cheered him, worshipped him; now the performance was over, and Narop had escorted him to his quarters, and he had slept fitfully; and when he awoke the word *comet* was on his lips. For he had dreamt of an army of childsoldiers turned comets and given the power to soar the night skies of a doomed world.

As he sat up and the floor contoured itself to support him, he felt strangely old. Once he and Ton Elloran, the Inquestor he served, had been boys together, friends even; now Sajit was aging while Elloran had not even begun to feel the touch of time. And when I am gone, he thought, he will go on and on, and he will forget me, because there is so much else that he must do. He must play the great game of *makrugh,* make war and peace with the other Inquestors. Sajit knew the doctrine by heart: man, a fallen being, needed wars to prevent stagnation, to prevent

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the heresy of utopia. But the Inquest, in its compassion, had taken all the guilt of war upon itself; and now not the shortlived but the Inquestors, with their games, decided the lives and deaths of star systems, and sent out the childsoldiers to kill. And because they bore all the guilt, and the guilt was more than men could bear (for though they ruled the million worlds of the Dispersal of Man, yet they were still no more than men), they had refined the game of *makrugh*, they had imbued it with artistry, they had made it beautiful. Even Sajit himself was not without guilt, living as he did in the shadow of the High Inquest; his music was much in demand as an exquisite backdrop to some of the bloodiest *makrughs* ever played.

That was why he had come to Bellares: not to escape the beautiful, but to understand the ugly. For one gave rise to the other, and they were inextricably woven in the tapestry of birth and death.

He heard breathing behind him. He turned. It was Narop, the childsoldier he had talked to before, and a woman he had not yet met. She wore a robe stitched from the skins of a dozen species of snakes. He recognized it as a sign of the Clan of Aush, whose special province was the linking of art and war.

"I am Aush Keshmin," she said. The voice: low, breathy; she could have been a musician, Sajit thought, evaluating it automatically. "Your childsoldier-in-attendance tells me that you have expressed an interest in our comets. I'm flattered, naturally, that an artist of your stature should throw a passing glance at our fledgling military art. As director of the comet project, I have had the honor of being involved in every stage of the design. . . ."

"I told him I wanted to be one when I die," Narop said eagerly.

Keshmin silenced him with a quick glance. He cowered for a moment, and then stood sharply to attention. "That day will come sooner than you want," Keshmin said, "if you don't learn to quell your impertinence!" Then she turned to Sajit, all smiles.

Sajit watched the boy. He was stiff as a statue now. Only a slight quiver of the lip revealed his terror. "Leave the boy be," he said to the woman.

She said, "As you wish, Shen Sajit. But you cannot be too hard on the creatures. They are not bred for compassion, like you people from the fancy courts of Inquestors. We drain the pity from them the day they first come here."

"I know, Aush Keshmin," Sajit said. "I know."

The military artist looked at him curiously for a moment. He said, "I have been here before."

"I see." She would not meet his eyes now, but shied away from him as if he were tainted.

"Perhaps, Keshmin, you will guide me now?" Sajit was buckling his kaleidokilt now, leaning his arm on Narop's shoulder. "I want so much to

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learn what it is you do. My Inquestor will want to know everything."

"Undoubtedly he already does, for it was from his palace that the conceit originated: the comet as death-angel."

"My master no longer plays *makrugh*," Sajit said. "It must be some other Inquestor." And already, in his mind, he was wondering who it could be: was it Siriss of the white hair and opal eyes, or cruel-mouthed Ton Satymyrys, who thought only of arcane pleasures, or Karakaël, the masked Inquestor, whose face no man had seen in a hundred years? These and many more met in the gardens of Elloran's palace to play the deadly game.

"Be that as it may," Aush Keshmin said, "come now." She began walking towards the only displacement plate in the small room. Sajit had the distinct impression that she was hiding something, some inner sadness. He did not think that she would have chosen this field, though one could not argue with the Inquestral granting of a clan-name. It was the only way to escape from being planetbound, from being a peasant, from meeting a childsoldierly death.

He followed her down straight gray corridors that cut across each other at right angles. He could not tell them apart, except that some had holosculptures of starships poised for attack, or companies of childsoldiers with the cloaks flying and the killing light streaming from their pitiless eyes. Some corridors were so long that Sajit could see no end to them, for the walls seemed to converge into distant pinpricks of light. They said nothing for a while; the boy was rigid, fearful of being rebuked again, while the woman's face was set into a mask, revealing nothing.

Finally, Sajit asked, "Are we below ground or above it?"

The woman laughed. "What does it matter, Shen Sajit? You are in hell. That's what matters. Tell that to your Inquestors."

But presently they reached an airchute, and Sajit followed the soldier and the artist as they jumped into it and floated upward. The walls became less gray, almost translucent; finally they were completely deopaqued, and Sajit saw that they were in the sunlight over a chessboard landscape, fields walled with barbed wire, cities of steel whose towers knifed the violet sky.

A floater awaited them, and in a moment they were slicing through the planet's dense, fragrant air. Sajit looked out over the fields, and he saw sights from his childhood. Here a batallion of childsoldiers on hoverdisks whirled in unison, the killing light darting from their eyes, kindling distant targets and toppling tall towers of a pseudocity. Even from this height he could hear the shrill warcry: *Isha ha! Isha ha!* It was a sound all humankind feared, a pure sound, pitiless, yet strangely innocent, for how could these children truly know what it was they did? They whirled over the fields like locusts. Sajit ached, knowing how narrowly he himself had missed the final tumblejoy.

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And presently they came to a starport that haunched out over a hill; and they took a shuttleglobe out beyond Bellares's atmosphere. And in all this time, since her bitter outburst, Keshmin had not said a word; the boy was frozen in a posture of attention; and Sajit stood watching the sky as it shifted imperceptibly from violet to dark blue to starry black. At last he saw where they were headed: a hospice, a vessel of bubbles and spikes, growing in the distance. Such places, he remembered, were often beyond the atmosphere, for some battlewounds were best treated without the encumbrance of gravity.

Suddenly Narop cried out; the woman did not chide him. He pointed up. Sajit looked. Beyond the hospice, three comets arced, one over the other, their tails twining in a braid of light.

He looked from boy to woman. Keshmin looked uneasy, as if fearful of his reaction. "It's breathtaking," he said at last, and for the first time she smiled, and he could see a certain beauty behind the stern lips, the care-sunken cheeks.

"I designed them," said Aush Keshmin.

And the boy repeated, "When I die, *hokh'Shen,* that's where I'm going."

Inside the hospice, Sajit was led into an atrium upon which the stars shone through a deopaquement of its domed high ceiling. Two fountains, fire and water, played on either side of them; it was all very restful. A crying, like a birdchoir in the dawn, pervaded the huge chamber. It came from the tier upon tier of levels that opened onto the atrium. The hall was so vast that the levels seemed like shelves, and the beds of dying children like boxes of toy soldiers; it was because it came from so far away, and from all sides, that their deathcrying was transmuted into the singing of birds. When Sajit looked up, he saw the three comets dance through the skywall.

"When they are about to die," Keshmin said, "we bring them here, we set up their deathbeds under the cometlight . . . it seems to ease their pain. Will you visit with our dying?"

Sajit nodded. Already he wanted to leave, to return to the palace; but there was something about this woman. With every look she taunted him. He followed her; the childsoldier walked behind, each step the perfect regulation length. A displacement plate took them up to one of the floors; in pallets against the walls, as far as he could see, the children lay dying. He followed as Keshmin went among them, whispering a word to one, holding the hand of another.

"Yes," she would say, replying to a hoarse question, "yes, you've been very loyal, they will choose you, I'm sure, they will, they will; you'll be up there in the sky, zooming and zinging among the stars." The words seemed to come automatically to her, a ritual formula.

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She was saying it for the fourth or fifth time when the child whose hand she was holding actually started to die. Sajit saw her, a pitiful rag of a little girl . . . how old could she have been? Seven? Eight? As he watched, the girl's eyelids began to flutter uncontrollably, and colors shifted on the holoscreen where a monitoring thinkhive was displaying her vital data. Aush Keshmin seemed to be listening to something, then to issue a subvocalized command with a flick of her mind.

All at once, a forceglobe formed about the dying child's head, abruptly severing it. As Sajit stared, dumbstruck by the sudden horror, the globe floated upward to a displacement plate in the ceiling. The eyelids were still fluttering, the mouth half opened in a silent scream. Sajit looked down at the headless corpse; a hundred metal tendrils had slithered into place about the neckstump, cauterizing, sucking away the blood.

"What does this mean?" he shouted. His voice echoed about the four walls of the great atrium. "What have you done to the child?"

Aush Keshmin's voice was distant, cold: "Don't shout, Shen Sajit; you'll disturb the others. Tonight we will see the girl dancing in the starlight. We're talking about a new kind of weapon, you know. A weapon that feels rage and wants vengenance, a weapon with a soul. That's what our comets have, you see! Better to serve the mysterious purposes of the High Inquest . . ."

"But the girl —"

"Her brain, Master Musician. It has to be fresh if it is to be at the center of the comet's consciousness. . . ."

Sajit looked from the woman to the childsoldier Narop. Through the hall the deathsighs of a thousand children echoed, like windchimes, like the tuning-up of a distant flutechoir. There stood the woman who had designed this twisted artifact. He marveled that she showed so little emotion at a child's death. Perhaps her mind was dulled; perhaps the single death was insignificant beside what that death could inflict, the death of millions more. "Do you feel no compassion, then?" he said.

"Compassion, Shen Sajit? That's for Inquestors to feel. My duty is to my art."

"A cold, bleak art."

"But there *is* beauty in it, musician, a grace of heartache in the slow arc of death."

"Show me more, then. I must see it all." The woman frightened him more and more. When he'd been a childsoldier, though, so long ago, he had thought he could fear nothing. She is so desolate, he thought, so hopeless, and yet she still believes herself an artist. What if *I* had been commanded by the Inquest to be a maker of toys of death? Could I still live with myself?

Aush Keshmin said, "You will see all, of course. That is your privilege as Inquestral delegate."

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"Yes. Narop, come." He turned to look for the boy.

Narop was standing at the very edge of the tier. His gaze was fixed on the deopaqued ceiling and the starstream.

The three comets had shifted now. They were chasing each other, their tails radiating out in a Catherine wheel, blurring. Now the comets broke loose from their tight circle and they began to soar and dive like porpoises in a sea of night. Now they flew in formation, tails swerving in concert.

The child stared at them with such terrible yearning . . . it was this longing that frightened Sajit most of all. For a moment he had recognized it in himself, but had dismissed the thought, had buried it in a mass of irrelevances, for he could not bear to admit the longing to himself.

And now they were in a starship and leaving Bellares behind. It was beautiful, this planet of killing children, when seen from afar, Sajit thought, as he watched the patterned lightstreaks crisscrossing the planet's mistlayer, bluewhite and fringed with violet where the sun's diamond peered through it. The woman Keshmin never met his eyes, but stared outwards, through the deopaqued screens that showed the three comets. Behind them were delphinoid warships.

"What is this?" he said. "You're taking me to a war, woman?"

"And why not? You demanded to be shown everything. Look at the comets. Soon we'll leave Bellares behind. As the sunlight fades, so will their streams of luminescent almost-vacuum. Soon they'll be dark and cold, like the hearts of the Inquestors that cause the wars to happen."

Sajit listened in silence, awed by the image. She went on, still avoiding his eyes: "But they won't be as cold as those mindless chunks of ice that orbit every star . . . each one has a precision thinkhive that controls its every movement, and each one is animated by a vengeful spirit . . . the brain of a dying childsoldier!"

"They are alive, then."

"Alive and not alive, master musician," said the military artist. "They're in a state of half-awareness, a kind of hypnosis, perhaps. These are brains that burn with loyalty to the Inquest. They see and hear through powerful prosthetics. They speak to us only when we give them machines to speak through. Soon the thinkhives will forge a dark corridor through the tachyon universe, and we will be in the vicinity of the world to be destroyed; the comets will catch fire from the sunlight and will dance their doomsayings over the chief cities of the world that is to *fall beyond;* then, at my signal, their dance will reach fever pitch, and they will fall upon the cities and crush them. It is beautiful, isn't it?"

Sajit said, "What is the world?"

"It is called Korith."

"Why will it *fall beyond?*"

"That I don't know. It's the will of the Inquest, of course, and in their

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compassion they have arranged for the people bins to carry off most of the population. We don't question the Inquest, Shen Sajit; we're soldiers. Come, do you wish to see more?"

They flicked by displacement plate into another chamber. There were strange instruments here, and forcecases that held human brains linked by wires to control panels. The walls were all deopaqued, so that it seemed that they rested on a platform drifting through empty space; and above their heads the comets swam still, their tails dim now.

"Why are we here?" Sajit asked.

"The control room," Keshmin said. And she summoned a hoverchair and was soon bent over some controls, while Sajit stared at the brains that hung in the air, forcebubbled, quivering a little. "Look!" As Sajit looked around him, at the spectral starscape, he saw the stars shimmer strangely; he felt a queasy, dead sensation crawling up his throat from his stomach. He knew then that they were preparing to break open a tachyon corridor, to breach the space between spaces. For this was war, and war must be fought instantaneously; it could not wait for the leisurely pace of pinholing through the overcosm. As he watched, a wedge of blackness parted the starstream and grew wider and wider, as though the sky was a skin and the darkness a surgical incision held open by forceps; and they were accelerating towards the cleft. . . .

And abruptly, it closed behind them, and they were in another region of space; for now the band of the starstream stretched up and down, and a red star dangled from it like a cherry.

"The Korith system?" said Sajit.

"Yes," said Keshmin.

As she spoke, the three comets soared into existence overhead, having made the crossing in the starship's field. Sajit saw other delphinoid ships too: full, he knew, of childsoldiers. A pearl of a planet ballooned abruptly out of the dark. "Korith?" said Sajit.

"Yes. And now the dance will begin."

The comets were one, three-tailed now, arrow-aimed at the half-world. Awed, Sajit watched. Now the tails broke free of the strand and they whirled, blinding-fast, like a Catherine wheel. Now the three separated, swam like flamefish through the black. Now they arched as one, now three, now one, now three . . .

"They will be seeing them now, on Korith," said Keshmin. A grim smile stole over her features. Sajit watched first the woman, then the boy, whose eyes shone with longing. He thought: I have never hated the universe so much.

"What are you thinking, master singer?" Keshmin said. "You don't have to tell me. You think I'm tainted, don't you? You despise me."

"How can you call this art?"

"And you, *hokh'Shen!* What about you? It's you who lull the Inques-

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tors' minds after they have decreed these world-burnings, isn't it? It's you who envelop your masters with beauty, so they no longer understand about death that falls without reason from the sky."

"No!" Sajit trembled. This was a sorry woman, a vicious, callous woman . . . how was it then that her words rang true? He turned away. "Give me a private chamber. I will not watch this war. I'm going to compose. Attend me, boy."

"Coward!" Aush Keshmin hissed after him, as his feet sought the displacement plate.

Narop led him to a spartan square chamber walled with metalfrost. He sank down onto the yielding floor. There was a whisperlyre there, and a starharp of concert size, the seven frames of strings fanning out from the controlseat like a silvery asterisk. The grayness of the room rested his eyes. The boy stood guard.

Presently he said: "What do you think of all this, then, Narop-without-a-Clan?"

"That your kind, master, are too delicate for war."

"Delicate! Delicate!" Sajit shouted. "No, don't be afraid, don't shy away like that. Shall I sing you a song of space battles, of heroism and courage?"

"If you wish, *hokh'Shen.*" And the boy settled back against the dull wall to listen.

Sajit performed, as much for himself as for the boy. But the words of the songs seemed empty. Presently curiosity overcame him; he thought of the three comets and their cold stardance. He ordered the walls deopaqued so he could see them. Once more the night engulfed them, and they saw the comets: writhing, twisting, zigzagging over the darkside of the crescent planet.

And behind the world, a fleet of delphinoid ships, waiting to rain destruction. Like a swarm of phosphorflies.

Then came an alarm. A metallic screech, earsplitting. "What is the matter?"

A voice: *Alert. Alert. Stations. Stations.*

"What is the matter now?" The alarm awoke old memories in Sajit, memories he had thought buried forever. Once, once only, he had escaped a shredded starship —

"Come, boy," he said. The boy — he could see that the boy was clenching back terror — preceded him to the displacement plate. They stepped into the control room of wires and floating brains —

"What has happened?" Sajit cried. "I am an Inquestral ambassador. Are we being attacked?"

He saw Aush Keshmin now, white. Her lips hardly moved. She pointed at the deopaqued ceiling.

A comet had broken loose, disrupting the pattern. It was making its

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way towards the fleet.

"It has awakened," she said. "Malfunction of its lifesupport . . . it has decided to attack *us!*"

"Why?" Sajit whispered.

"It was a terrible idea. To give them consciousness. There was always the possibility. It's gone mad, Shen Sajit, mad!"

"Retreat, then! Abort the mission."

"And the other comets? Their programming is set. The Inquest will not be pleased."

"How long do you have?"

"A few hours yet, *hokh'Shen.*"

"Hours . . ."

Aush Keshmin played with control panels. Lights darted across holoscreens. "I am opening a communicating channel," she said, "switching on the comet's eyes and ears so we can hear its thoughts . . . *now.*"

And then Sajit could hear it, a faint, kittenlike voice, like the edge of a wind —

Ma . . . ma

"What does this mean?" he cried.

Ma . . . ma

"By all the powers of powers!" Aush Keshmin said. "The child was not quite dead enough. It has woken from its trance state. It's afraid. It's found something it doesn't like. But that's impossible! We select the children for the utmost loyalty to the Inquest. They are screened, tested, psychically probed to the limit —"

"But what is it saying?"

"Why, it's crying for its mother, of course. Childsoldiers often do that, the first day or two of training."

Sajit hated her then. He knew that the woman cared only for the chill beauty of her deathdance, and not at all that a child was in pain. He tried to remember the pain himself. He saw himself fleeing down the flame-twisted corridors of a dying starship. For a fleeting moment it was more real to him than all the splendor of Elloran's Varezhdur.

And the woman was saying, "We will have to destroy them all."

But Sajit said, "Will you not find out what kind of child this was? Its name? Its former homeworld? Perhaps there will be some information you can use."

"Very well," said Keshmin stonily.

Ma . . . ma

Sajit remembered the voice now. His own past. Once he had had a mother. How long ago? Time dilations had taken their toll, and she must be lost in the far past.

Keshmin was subvocalizing instructions to the central thinkhive of the

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ship now. For a while they heard nothing but the whining of the little lost voice. Then came the thinkhive's voice, metallic, echoey: *The comet that is now insane, Aush Keshmin, was once Yryan-without-a-Clan, son of a merchant of Korith —*

"You fool!" shouted Sajit. "You sent a childsoldier against his own homeworld! In my day such a thing was never done!"

"You don't understand! That's no child out there, it's a machine, malfunctioning . . ."

Out of the silence came the childish voice: *Mama . . . bad men are coming . . . they want to kill you . . . but I'll stop them . . . stop them . . .*

"I will communicate with it," Aush Keshmin said. "Listen, child of the tumblejoy! Resume your programming at once! Or you will be destroyed!" She spoke these words to the air; communicators were relaying them into the mind of the comet.

It's trying to tell me to kill you, mama . . . it's bad, bad, bad, I won't listen . . .

"It's useless to reason with it!"

For a while they stood, master musician and artist of death, hating each other. Finally, Sajit said: "You cannot make it understand, Keshmin, that its mother is long long dead. How can you make it understand? You yourself cannot understand. It fears you. You are evil to it. No, *I* must go to it, Aush Keshmin, because though I seem now almost as high as the Inquestors, I was once like this Yryan."

"It is safer to destroy the comets and return," Keshmin said sullenly.

"I am an Inquestral ambassador, and I demand to visit the comet. We still have time. Through Ton Elloran n'Taanyel Tath, my master, I assume responsibility."

"You meddling street singer! You'll use this, no doubt, for one of your melodramatic songs, to ease the stomachs of Inquestors at dinner parties."

"Say what you want. I have the authority."

Why did I say that now? he thought. What masochism is it that impels me to pursue the ugly, the anguished? But I must go. It's my past that calls me. Ghosts must be faced and exorcised.

Aush Keshmin turned to summon a shuttlecraft.

The pearl-world wheeled above them, ravishing, doomed.

They did not speak; their anger walled them from each other. But from across the silence of space, the comet cried for its mother.

. . . space now. A shuttlecraft. The comet's tail rearing up, dividing the night with its swath of radiance.

At first Sajit had insisted on going up to the comet alone. But it was true that he needed Keshmin's technical aid; and he wanted the childsoldier there too. He had an overpowering desire to strip away the boy's illusions,

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to show him the degradation behind the dream. He did not know why he had this urge. It was almost criminal to open the boy's eyes, to let him see the utter hopelessness of the universe. Sajit was angry and bitter.

Presently the band of incandescence filled the whole screen. It was a million klomets long, this dust-tail, and thinner than most vacua; and yet it glowed. When they entered the tail the darkness barely changed; only before and after, in the plane of their flight, was a barely perceptible shining. And in the distance, the head: a snowball of frozen gases with a child's soul at its kernel.

And all the while, as they were approaching, the craft's thinkhive relayed the crying of the comet.

"How much time?"

"Two hours. Then, whether you will or no," said Keshmin, "ambassador or not, you will die, because I have ordered the comets aborted. Do you understand? I obey instructions, Shen Sajit. I do not have whims, as you palace parasites do. Your whim may kill the three of us."

"Quiet! Think of the planet's millions. They will die too."

"We saved as many as we could. Already the people bins have left with as many stasis-packed humans as could be persuaded to leave, threading the overcosm like a million segments of silver centipede."

Grimly, Sajit looked ahead. He clutched his whisperlyre to his chest; at the last moment he had brought it from his room on the starship, needing a sense of security.

They landed. A forcetube dug its way out of the snow. They put on pressure skins; Sajit felt the strange isolation as the unicellular skin warped around his body and his whisperlyre. They plated from the craft; Sajit felt the gutwrench of near-weightlessness. Ahead was the tube of nothing. They walked to it over the icerock peppered with methane snow. Though the pressure skin shielded him from the cold and fed him oxygen, Sajit felt another kind of chill. It was the silence between the stars, the utter aloneness. Once starpilots had sailed this silence, and known nothing of the overcosm.

In moments the three were following the forcetunnel deep into the heart of the comethead. There was a little cell there, lined with instruments and walled with gray metal. "Can he see us?" said Sajit. For now that they were at the seat of the comet's soul, they could no longer hear its projected voice.

"Not yet." Keshmin touched a stud; all at once the child's sobbing burst into the chamber. "After I subvoke a few commands to the thinkhive, you will become visible to it."

"Stay out of its line of vision," Sajit whispered. He dared not raise his voice. There was a presence here, a thing undead.

Woman and boy stepped into the shadows. He felt their eyes on him, but tried to forget. To concentrate. In front of him were semiorganic

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machines, spirals and corkscrews of metal fanning out from growths of lichen; and a circlet of mirror metal. His own face stared back at him.

"Make him see me," he whispered. And he called the dead boy's child-name: "Yrieh, Yrieh."

A swirl of mist in the mirror; then a holosculpt image of the boy's face, culled by the thinkhive from its repertory of remembrances . . . eyes of burning amber . . . thin pale lips . . . a mane of midnight hair . . . he could have been the twin of Narop-without-a-Clan. "Listen, listen, Yrieh. Can you hear me? Can you see me?"

The boy's voice, echobent, tinged with metal: *Who are you? . . . Are you my mother?*

"A friend."

You're from the bad people. I'm not turning back. I'm going to kill you all, all, all.

"It must be destroyed!" Keshmin whispered urgently.

"Be quiet! Don't let him hear you," said Sajit. To the boy: "I am Sajitteh."

. . . one of the childsoldiers?

"One of the childsoldiers."

Tears streamed down the cheeks of the ghostface in the mirror. *I woke up . . . they tell me I'm dead . . . I'm not dead . . . I'm awake . . . I've got power, kill-power . . . bring me my mother . . . or I'll kill the whole fleet, I'll kill, kill, kill . . .*

"Why, Yrieh, why?" Sajit said. He could hardly contain his anger. "You can tell me."

You'll understand? . . . not like the others.

"You must make him turn around. Or put him back to sleep," Keshmin said, "so that the comet can be operated automatically."

. . . Whose voice? One of them?

"No, Yrieh," said Sajit. "Listen. Your mother's gone, child."

No!

"Are you afraid?"

Yes. Afraid. I woke up in the dark. In the dark, falling towards my homeworld.

"You didn't feel the tumblejoy?"

Joy? Joy?

"The wild joy of the dance of killing? Surely they taught you that?"

Joy? I feel alone, alone, and cold, cold, afraid, afraid.

"Go to sleep."

No! Then I'll never wake up again.

How could he deny that? Never had Sajit felt so angry about the cruelty that the Inquest inflicted so casually, every second of its existence, in the name of the High Compassion. Sajit searched his mind for a solution. Either alternative meant death for some. Both were death for the child-

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comet, a second death. Should I lie to him? he thought. Tell him his mother's coming to him?

He pulled out his whisperlyre from his tunic. "I will sing to you," he said. "Then you won't be afraid anymore." And he played a few notes, feeling the lyre suck the warmth from his chest, hearing the plucked sounds echo.

The spectral eyes watched him, wide with innocence. He reminded himself that those eyes had killed. As, once, his own had.

He sang a lullaby. Once his mother had sung it to him. But that was in another time, and could not be brought back.

He sang:

Sleep, child, sleep;
The Inquestors are watching you
from their far heaven.
The wings of pteratygers are fanning you.
The war is done.
Your mother's arms are warm.
Sleep, child, sleep.

As Sajit sang he began to weep. He could not help himself. Often he had wept in concerts; this was part of his art, something that moved audiences, that could be controlled. Not this. He wept for his own lost childhood. He wept for his Inquestor, Elloran, who had drowned himself in beauty so that he might not feel the pain. As he sang the whisperlyre stole all his body heat, compounding its resonance with it. He was so cold. But still he sang:

The war is done.
Your mother's arms are warm.
Sleep, child, sleep.

And the wraithface in the mirror closed its eyes and was beautiful in sleep, and at peace.

Sajit said, "I have taken away his pain. That is my art."

He turned to his two companions. Aush Keshmin was shaking, nervous; she could not meet his eyes. He seized her by the chin and forced her to look at him. "Now, death-artist! Do you see what you've done? You turn children into monsters, but in their hearts they have not lost their innocence utterly. They are not beasts."

Keshmin said, "I didn't know that before. No. I did know. But I buried what I knew. I knew that any clan-name was better than none. Please, master musician, take my name from me."

"The comet will function properly now?"

"Yes. It will fall on Korith and destroy cities."

"And do you rejoice?"

"How can I?"

And then Sajit turned to the boy Narop. He stood in the wall's shadow,

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shuffling his feet. "Look at me, Narop!" Sajit cried. "Is this what you want to be when you die?"

And suddenly, appallingly, the boy began to cry. He was only a little boy after all. Sajit saw the crumpled sable cloak and the iridium boots, too shiny, and knew them to be toy armor for toy soldiers . . . "Don't cry," he said tenderly. To the woman he said, "Don't despair." And to both: "Where there is bitterness there must be beauty too. It has always been so, and always will be. I will free you."

For he knew now why he had been moved to come to Bellares, to the place of his tormented childhood . . . it was as the woman had put it. To make a song to ease the stomachs of Inquestors, she had said. That was true, but not the whole truth.

They returned to the craft, and thence to the starship. Sajit did not choose to watch the end of the dance of comets, nor the death of Korith. He had seen such things before. He knew what he would see from far in space: a sudden vaporous burning in the planet's atmosphere, a patch or two of brilliance . . . an eruption of diamonds on the surface . . . and the chain of people bins, spiralling into space like a necklace, seeking an entrance to the overcosm where they would sail the centuries until another world was found for them.

But when he left for Varezhdur, he took Keshmin and Narop with him. And they were with him when he was ushered at last into the throneroom of Ton Elloran, his master, whom trillions called *the compassionate one.*

The gold, the gold . . .

They passed through hallways with gilt-burnished walls, inlaid with highscript poems in lapis lazuli, Sajit's own poems . . . groves of gold-plated arbors crisscrossed with streams that glittered with gold dust . . . the woman gaped, sullen at first, uncomprehending . . . the childsoldier cried out in delight . . . and Sajit saw that they had reached the corridor lined with a hundred reliefed ptertygers of Ontian marble, and he knew that he was home. And in a moment they were in Elloran's throneroom, built around Dei Zhendra's great galaxy of dust. A shimmerviol music played from a hidden alcove, and the chill pure voice of a neuterchild was singing one of Sajit's own songs.

Sajit looked at his master, who sat, closed-eyed, on a great throne.

"Elloran," he said.

Abruptly, the music stopped.

Elloran opened his eyes. How old he was! Had Sajit been gone that long, then? "Elloran, I'm home."

"Who are these?"

"The woman was once a maker of deathtoys. The boy was once a childsoldier. But Elloran, they are not what they were made to be! They have poetry in them." Sajit came closer to the throne. He saw his master's

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face: how tired, how world-weary. The shimmercloak itself dwarfed him, and the huge throne of gold. And he beckoned Aush Keshmin and Narop-without-a-Clan to him, but they cowered behind him, not daring to stare at the throne's brilliance.

"Oh, Sajitteh, Sajitteh," Elloran said, "always the redeemer! You'd save the souls of everyone in the universe, if you could."

"And what of it?" Sajit said, his anger bursting out at last. And he told Elloran what he had seen. How they'd been making dead children into deathweapons. How one had awakened in terror and gone mad. And how he had lulled it to sleep with an ancient song, and given it an illusion of peace. "Why do you let these things happen, Elloran?" he cried out.

"Tell me, Sajit. Were they not beautiful, these comets, when they danced?"

"Yes. That was the most terrible thing."

"Is there not pain in everything beautiful . . . ? It is true that I let this happen. But once, long ago, at a game of *makrugh,* you were singing us a new song as we played at burning worlds. Do you remember the words? Perhaps not. You have written a thousand songs. Here, though, are lines from the song:

"What if the stars had life?
What if the comets felt anger
As they burned across the space between worlds?

"It was your song, Sajit, that gave rise to the idea —"

"No!" cried Sajit. "It was your players of *makrugh* who twisted my meaning into a cruel conceit!"

"Sajitteh. . . ." Sajit saw terrible sadness in the Inquestor's eyes. And because he loved his master, he could not be angry.

"I know," he said, "that you too are trapped by the Inquest's doctrine. You are compelled to maintain the stasis of the Dispersal of Man, and to create such little wars as may be necessary to give the illusion of movement; it is thus that you preserve the balance between utopianism and progress."

"You could almost be an Inquestor," said Elloran, jesting to hide the hurt.

"You don't fool me. You too are a victim, imprisoned by your own power."

"Yes. Yes."

"That, Elloran, is the lesson I learnt on Bellares, and at the comet's heart."

"And what else did you learn?"

"That we must wrest from the universe every fleeting moment of beauty, of freedom, of truth."

"Old lessons, Sajitteh." Elloran closed his eyes again.

Sajit said to his two companions: "You are free now. Elloran has

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released you. You can stay in Varezhdur and travel through Elloran's worlds; or you can leave. You will be given money. What do you want?"

Keshmin said, "It's so beautiful here . . . I didn't know . . ."

"Can I serve you?" said Narop. "I'll be your slave."

"I am a slave," said Sajit. The thought no longer rankled him. "By all means, then, stay. Drink in Varezhdur's loveliness. When the time comes, you will want to leave, like I did, and face the ugliness again; and perhaps you will want to return. But for now, be happy."

He summoned an usher to find them apartments in the palace. Keshmin smiled at last. The boy was walking on air as they left.

Finally he was alone with Ton Elloran n'Taanyel Tath, Lord of Varezhdur, Princeling of Many Tributaries.

"Well, Sajitteh!" said Ton Elloran. "Two saved. How many more to go?"

Sajit didn't answer; he only smiled. Then he said, "How long was I gone?"

"Forever. It must have been only a few years to you; for me it was a century."

"No wonder you seem old."

"Old! I missed you, Sajitteh." His eyes sparkled. "What was that lullaby you sang to the child-comet?"

"A silly ditty, Inquestor, quite without art. My mother sang it to me once."

"Sing it to me."

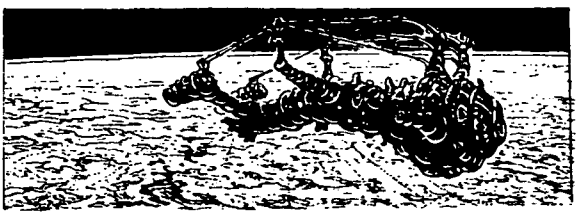
"But —"

"Come, Sajitteh! Only chance has elevated me above that child whose soul they planted in a comet. That's why I need you. To remind me that I'm still human. I am, you know. Human. Yes. I, the all-wise, the all-compassionate . . . the burner of worlds."

Sajit sang. Without an instrument, in a soft comforting voice. Just the way he remembered it from childhood, before they took him away to Bellares, to be a childsoldier.

As he sang he watched the Inquestor's face. What worries plagued him now? What problems of planets? He could not tell. But he meant to soothe the pain. That was his art. Illusion, perhaps, but still art.

Elloran slept.



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PRODUCING THE MODEL "A"

by William F. Wu

I recently spent two weeks in the People's Republic of China as part of a science-fiction group that also included Frederik Pohl; Dr. Elizabeth Anne Hull, the tour leader; Charles N. Brown, publisher of *Locus*; Roger Zelazny and his wife, Judy; and Peggy Houle. We met with writers, editors, and translators in several Chinese cities, while simultaneously experiencing the world's oldest continuing civilization. The contrast between our subject matter and our environment was striking.

Science fiction in China has its own history, of course. According to one source, the first piece of Chinese science fiction is an ancient story in which someone constructs a mechanical man. A copy was not available, but we couldn't have read it, anyway. My ability with Chinese is negligible, and the others in the group have none. So we were largely at the mercy of Chinese hosts who could speak English, some far better than others.

Modern science fiction first entered China in the 1920s, as some of the work of Jules Verne was translated into Chinese, and then some of Wells's. By the 1950s, some indigenous Chinese SF had been published, but the government stopped it from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, finding it politically unacceptable. Since then, a more progressive government under Deng Xiaoping has allowed a new literary flowering, and contemporary Chinese SF has been a part of this.

Chinese SF is in a stage of evolution roughly equivalent in some ways to that of American SF in the late 1920s. It is written largely for children and adolescents. Also, it is regarded by its adherents as the messenger of future technology. Finally, other Chinese literati consider it a substandard form of fiction. Of course, this question of quality was difficult for us to judge.

In Shanghai, for instance, we met with a number of SF writers, the most prominent of whom was Ye Yonglie, who has had seventy-five stories published. Translator Wu Dingbo interpreted for them and also joined in the discussion of science fiction in China. For the fiction itself, though, our information was limited to plot summaries. These could in no way convey characterization, style, or nuances, but they did give us the basic story ideas. What these summaries indicated was that most Chinese SF right now is made up of simplistic moral tales set in an optimistic near future.

Other sources confirmed that Chinese science fiction is generally optimistic and aimed no more than a generation or so ahead. Fred Pohl talked about the dystopian futures of some western SF and explained that they were often presented as warnings and not as straight predictions. In China, however, the declared purpose of the SF writer is to present uplifting tales of how life will soon improve.

This raises obvious questions. If this purpose is so widespread, then who

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decided on it? And what happens to an author whose vision strays from this pattern?

Many of our sources simply said that Chinese readers want upbeat stories of the near future. No one suggested that the government dictated this, directly or indirectly. However, the phrase "Chinese readers" is so vague as to be meaningless.

In Xian, a city in western China, we met Wei Yahua, a pleasant, confident writer who seemed to answer both the above questions. A couple of years ago, he wrote a downbeat short story about China's problem with overpopulation, titled as "Conjugal Happiness in the Arms of Morpheus," which appears in English for the first time in this issue. Critics assailed it on political grounds, and Chinese publishing houses stopped handling science fiction for the first seven months of 1982.

As near as we could learn, however, this was a case of self-censorship by the publishers, not a government dictate. The criticism blew over and the publishers resumed turning out SF. I asked Wei if he felt he could someday draw so much criticism that the publishers would cease publishing his work, specifically. He said no.

Tentatively, then, we have two answers. The taste for upbeat, near-future stories comes from those critics who feel that art can and should be judged by political standards, as was especially the vogue during China's Cultural Revolution, 1966 - 1976. This was the prevailing attitude at that time, and it lingers. Second, a writer who crosses them might cause a great stir, and even precipitate a policy change in publishing — but he apparently is in no fear of being sent off to work in the countryside, where political prisoners once joined criminals in the equivalents of Siberian work camps.

Unfortunately, these answers were suspect. Wei spoke no English, and so communicated through the services of a Chinese interpreter. I could follow enough of the conversation to judge that our interpreter was faithful to both questions and answers, but Wei may not have wished to speak freely in the presence of a countryman he did not know personally. His answers, in fact, were very polished and smooth, rather than relaxed and spontaneous. Of course, he might have been formal because his American guests were new acquaintances, and not because of their interpreter.

Another source confirmed these answers, though. Charlie Brown and I visited one of China's leading actors at his home in Beijing (Peking). Our host was fluent in English and has experience traveling to other countries, including the U.S. With only the three of us present, he spoke at length, frankly discussing China's political direction and the future of its arts. This was spiced with anecdotes, and he clearly had no fear of government interference in the theater on political grounds. As in the case of publishing, some critics have continued to judge plays by political criteria, but they do not represent government interests. In fact, they have drawn backlash from critics who believe that only aesthetic considerations should apply to art. As

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in the U.S., reviewers in China now give their opinions as individuals. This tallies with information from our science-fiction source.

Our host had credibility with me for a couple of reasons. One is that he had nothing to do with science fiction and had nothing personal to gain by giving us a false impression. Another is that he has spent enough time in the U.S. to understand how art and critics function here, and to make lucid comparisons. Also, this was the third time I had spoken to him, and he was much the same in China as he had been in the U.S. when I first met him. Finally, his discussions of his own career suggest that, like most of China's creative artists, he had been prevented from working at his craft by the government during the Cultural Revolution. He has good reason to attack government censorship in private, and no discernible reason to conceal it if it exists.

The very fact that we were meeting with writers indicated a major change since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Even the current regime has relaxed its controls on everyday life since I was first in China in 1980. Nevertheless, China still does not have a tradition of civil rights in the American sense, and I have two reasons for not giving the names of our most interesting hosts. One is that China's government can change literally overnight; the other is that I may be wrong in particulars, though I don't believe so. In either case, I do not wish to cause trouble for any plain-speaking friends.

Right now, though, the biggest problem for Chinese science fiction is its own lack of quality. Most of the writers have a very limited knowledge of what has already been written in other countries, and the difficulty of translation means that a large body of classic SF in Chinese will not be available for a long time. Fred Pohl suggested that none of the work described to us would be competitive in U.S. markets except as a curiosity from China. The ideas were simple and not constructed anywhere near the frontiers of scientific knowledge.

Fantasy, by the way, is not considered a sibling of science fiction in China. Anything with dragons, magic, and fairies is associated with China's rich lore of myths, legends, and folktales — the stuff of superstition in premodern times. Science fiction, with the emphasis theoretically on science, is considered to be an opposite form of literature, and a superior one.

The most intriguing Chinese SF writer to date may be Wei Yahua. The stories in his 1981 collection titled *I Want to Divorce My Robot Wife* include two novellas, two novelettes, and a short story, all of which succeed on an adult level. They are, of course, set close to the present and the science-fiction ideas are not especially striking. However, several of them involve social issues and ethical dilemmas that do not fit the pattern of optimistic escapism. In addition to the controversial title story, the book includes "The Bell Tower is Gone," about a huge, ancient bell tower in the middle of downtown Xian and the efforts of a man to remove it for reconstruction elsewhere. Though primarily a love story, it raises an important

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social question: how should modern China relate to its past? Huge and tiny relics of its long civilization survive all over the country, both sources of pride and, often, physical obstructions to progress. My limited knowledge of Chinese suggests that Wei's writing is emotional, perhaps to the point of melodrama at times. He shows promise, however, in his writing SF for adults on controversial subjects.

I believe the main reason for the simplicity of China's science fiction so far is that China's technological development is still a strange mix of modern industry and ancient ways. Trucks and buses vie for space on the highways with pony carts and herds of goats. Human labor powers some rural irrigation pumps, while major coal-burning power plants spew smog over the cities. Scientific advance has not yet forced its way into the consciousness of every Chinese, as it has with Americans. Chinese writers therefore have not had the experience with abrupt social change brought about by technological advance that has characterized several generations of American SF writers. In the 1920s, the U.S. was undergoing a similar transformation, as phenomena such as commercial radio and automobiles became routine parts of life. I believe that is an important reason genre SF sprouted here at that time. In China, the change is only now on its way, but it is coming. Few sights in China were as striking as a line of one-story, wind-eroded homes of mud brick on the edge of a desert, all sprouting large TV aerials.

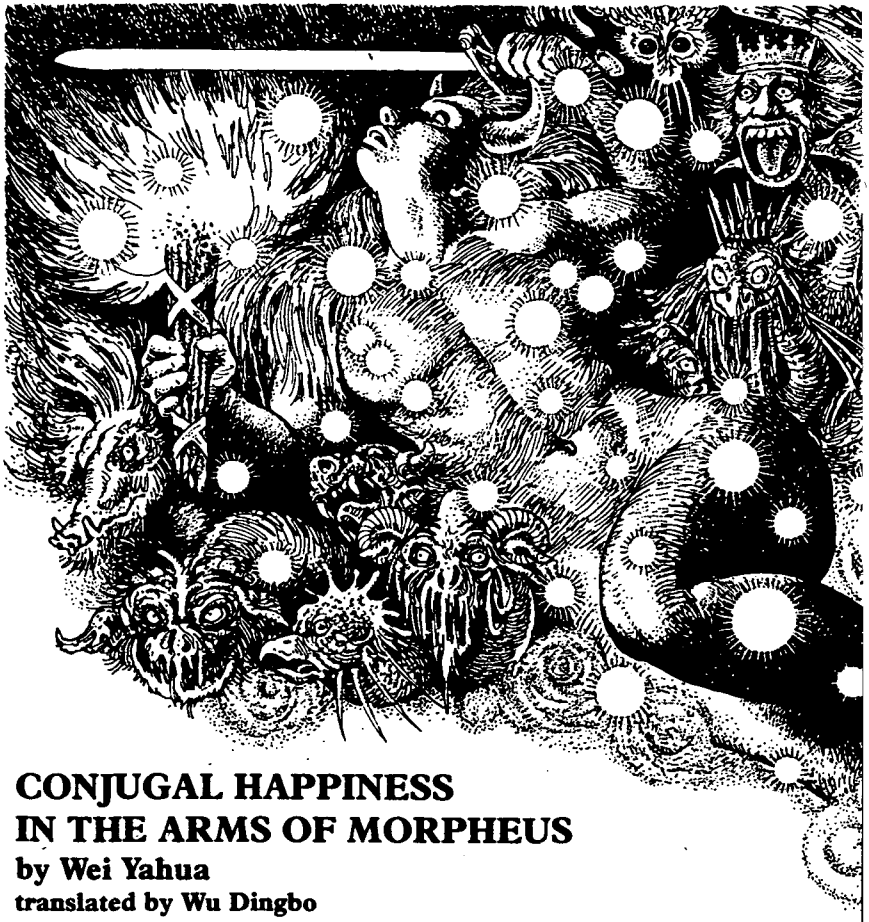
The author, William F. Wu, was born and raised in the American Middle West, and is of Chinese descent. The subject of his dissertation, at the University of Michigan, was Chinese-American stereotypes in American popular fiction.

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CONJUGAL HAPPINESS IN THE ARMS OF MORPHEUS

by Wei Yahua
translated by Wu Dingbo
adapted by Elizabeth Anne Hull
art: Hank Jankus

Whenever we have fears that SF may be pure escapism with no real effect, we have only to consider the Chinese. They know that it does something, and they worry about what it might do.

At the Foreign Languages Institute in Shanghai, Wu Dingbo intermittently teaches the only univeristy-level course in SF in China.

Elizabeth Anne Hull, too, thinks and writes about what SF can be and do. She is an active member of World SF and of the SF Research Association.

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The End

I've resolved to divorce her!

No matter how she pleads for my forgiveness, with her jet-black eyes glistening with tears, no matter how she tries to cool my anger with her tenderheartedness, with the special language between husband and wife, the case is closed.

Lili: my love and my ruination — back she must go and I'll go on, if at all, without her.

Once I believed that my marriage was the most blissful on earth, but I've made up my mind to divorce her now.

And why, you ask?

The Beginning

Only a little more than a year ago, on my twenty-second birthday, I received the usual pink card, smelling strongly of musk rose, from the Marriage Management Center. With mixed emotions I had looked forward to that day, for it held my only hope of finding a wife to be my companion for life. And there it was in my hand that day — my birthday — the small stiff pink card which could be traded for the bride of my choice — among all the models at any distribution center.

For, as you might already have guessed, the sad fact is that there was never any hope for me to marry naturally. There had been expectations for my elder brother Aidang, of course, until my parents had produced my sister Lihua. But as the third child, my own prospects had always been dim. Under the latest population laws and regulations, based on sound eugenic principles, Lihua enjoyed the privileges of women designed to prevent the devolution of the human species. She could marry a natural man, some lucky only child.

But I can't complain, you see, for if my parents hadn't had three children, where would I be at all?

Still the fact remained: Aidang and I had to marry robots or remain single. Aidang was nearly thirty at the time and had not yet married. How should one consult his elder brother for advice when the elder brother was just as innocent of experience as himself?

Spouse Selection

Determined to face my decision alone, I waited only one day before heading for the Universal Robot Company. It wasn't the nearest, but surely the largest robot distribution center in our province. A three-hour train ride brought me there well before noon. I was honored to be greeted by the general manager himself, a proud fellow who accompanied me to the supermarket sales floor. He bragged of his own efficiency, not merely letting his robots idly serve as mannequins for the customers to watch and choose from passively. Instead he had all his robots working as salesgirls and attendants,

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so customers like me could appreciate their usefulness as well as their handsomeness.

I gazed with open mouth, stunned by the spectacle of ten thousand dazzling robot girls, no two alike, yet each seeming to be incomparable perfection herself. I felt as if I were strolling in a garden where a hundred flowers bloomed. Any choice seemed impossible, for to take one meant to leave all the others behind.

The general manager waved his hand grandly, indicating all the girls.

"You'll be glad you came here to make this all-important decision," he assured me. "We're first-rate. First of all, we employ the world's first-class artists. We have a strong lineup of aesthetists, composed of painters, sculptors, and craftsmen. We've taken the aesthetic data of the most beautiful women, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern, of all races." He smiled at my stunned face.

"For four thousand years since the dawn of history, mankind has carried on a kind of natural aesthetic sifting and reducing by way of love-making. However, this process is rather slow, and is frequently disrupted and interfered with by all kinds of other factors such as power and property, politics and economics, pride and prejudice. But now, with the production of robots, this process can be manipulated by computer according to human will. As a result, what would have taken several centuries, we have been able to do in just a few weeks or months.

"Among the records of the Universal Robot Company," he continued, "we keep all the aesthetic data of those ancient Eastern beauties like Xi Shi, Wang Qiang, Yang Yuhuan, Zhao Feiyan, Lu Zhu, Ying Ying, Zhuo Wenjun — but there are also Western types if you prefer: Paris girls, Gypsy girls, girls of the Roman type and the Constantinople type, angelic girls like Helena, and the romantic girls like Shakespeare's Desdemona and Pushkin's Argulina."

I looked and saw that all he claimed was true. If the finished products (each had something to recommend herself and each had her own unique graceful carriage) should fail to please a customer — no worry; the customer could have robots made to order. The manager must have thought that my silence meant that I didn't like any of the girls, but that was just the opposite of the truth — I loved them all.

"You can put forth your special requirements," the manager assured me. "We can produce a celestial beauty second to none. Such a kind of girl as you've seen only in your dreams. You won't be able to help loving her because she'll come from your own soul."

The manager led me around. We strolled slowly so I could have plenty of time to appreciate the angelic girls. An artist once said: man is the most beautiful of all natural shapes. Man is nature's masterpiece. As the Chinese ancients said: man is the pith and marrow of earth and heaven, the cream of the cream in the world. Those words seemed to me to be oracles indeed.

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Man is superior among all beautiful shapes and beautiful forms of expressions in the whole universe, I thought. And those robot girls were all like newly blooming flowers. Each was more delicate and charming than the other.

The manager said with pride, "Surely no one who sees them can be unmoved. They are all *par excellence*. Your eyes can only see part of their charms — external beauty. As a matter of fact, they also have internal beauty — moral excellence, which is more beautiful and which will be the wellspring of your undying love. Since a robot girl's mode of thinking is as succinct, definite, strict, and unique as mathematic formulas and geometric theorems, she loves only one man all her life. Once a man's name is filled in on her voucher, she will love him forever: constant, faithful, unyielding, and unswerving."

I grinned. "But what if I should die?" I asked.

The manager patted me on the shoulder. "She is designed in accordance with the law of symmetry of the universe. Her service life is symmetric to your lifespan. Her existence is symmetric to yours and your death is also symmetric to her. Do you understand?"

Walking slowly, we appreciated those wonderful flowers of science.

The manager waved an expansive hand and beamed over his wares. "That's just one aspect. Here's another. These robot girls are not only more beautiful but also more gentle than flowers. Your wife-to-be will never engage in strife with you, never quarrel with you."

"Really?" I asked. So far as I knew, no couple in the world, not even the most harmonious ones, could be exempt from an occasional quarrel in their married life. And, according to the newly released findings reported by the United Nations, the divorce rate among natural human couples was tending to increase in recent years.

"Haven't you ever heard of the famous Three Laws of Robotics?" The manager stared at me with amazement as if I had had no knowledge that the earth revolves around the sun. He pointed at a white marble tablet standing upright at the center of the supermarket, supported on the back of one of the great stone turtles as if it were in a museum. On this tablet were engraved the glittering letters of the Three Laws of Robotics as laid out by that great American thinker, Isaac Asimov:

1. A robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

— *Handbook of Robotics*
56th Edition, A.D. 2085

"Those are the golden rules and precious precepts in our production of

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robots," the manager explained. "Before leaving the factory, every robot must undergo a strict examination. If a company produces or neglects to examine a robot which violates the Three Laws of Robotics, the company will immediately be fined, go bankrupt, and even be prosecuted legally."

Pointing at the Second Law, the manager assured me, "You'll be her monarch. She'll be ever obedient, ever loyal, and ever faithful to you. Like your hands and feet, she'll always be at your disposal. Unlike an independent person, she will seem to be an extension of your physical being. She'll obey all your orders unconditionally. She'll be your band and follow your melody harmoniously. You will have to love her!"

I walked and listened, listened and walked, as if in a dream, as if in seventh heaven. The manager kept on talking volubly with fervor, assuring me and assuaging all my fears and apprehensions. "She'll be sterile," I grumbled.

"You!" The manager's manner changed completely. Now he looked at me with sneering contempt. "You think sterility is her weak point? On the contrary; it's her strong point. Don't forget that she'll never grow old and that she'll always be a tender young girl, full of youthful vigor! Why do you want to have children, anyway? To support you when you grow old? Don't forget that daughters will sooner or later get married off. After marriage they often care for their husbands much more than their parents. And in most cases sons will forget their own mothers once they have wives. But a robot wife is different; she is the only one most loyal to you. She'll wait on you faithfully till the day you die a natural death. She can play both roles, as your wife and as your child. Where on earth can you find such perfection?"

Now he struck a pose and appeared to be reciting from memory. "As to robots' sterility, it is a great contribution of historical significance. Thanks to robots' sterility, we have solved the world-wide population crisis which began over a century ago, in the 1960s. Now the world population remains constant, around four billion. Thus we averted inflation, economic crises, famines, turmoils, wars — and the catastrophically demographic doom which overpopulation would otherwise have led to. Taking this into consideration, we can almost claim that robots have saved mankind. Can you still maintain that robots' sterility is a weak point?" he challenged triumphantly.

I was left without an argument, not only speechless, but hardly knowing how to speak.

Because I had discovered her — Lili!

I can't explain because I myself do not know why and how I identified her from the masses of the beautiful robot girls, at just that moment.

Nonetheless, the manager rambled on in a flow of eloquence. "Just because robots are sterile, our company still stands here now. Otherwise the natural human girls would have destroyed it. They are jealous of robot girls because the robots are far more charming. The human girls are too inferior in character to bear comparison in this respect. If the robot girls could bear

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children, the human girls would have felt too ashamed to show their faces and they would have been in danger of being cast aside. Only because the robot girls are sterile, the human girls can look down their noses at the robots and sneer at them. They say things like: 'Look at those hens which can never lay eggs!' And because the robots are sterile, human girls enjoy the privileges of the ration system of marriage." The manager gave a snorting laugh which showed he didn't think very highly of natural girls. "The robot girls are so well behaved that they will never seduce others' husbands. They work hard to keep harmonious relations with the natural human girls. They're dear sisters to them as well as to each other, but they are cold as ice to other men. They'll bravely defend their chastity from assault because self-defence is mandatory in the Third Law of Robotics." The manager only then discovered that I had lagged far behind him. "Come on, young man. Are you ready to choose?"

Behind the counter which sold famous wines stood a goddess. I was held spellbound, watching her as she in turn was gazing fixedly at the next counter where there were large aquariums. Some various-colored goldfish were vying with a school of dazzling brilliant Spanish mackerel for food.

I can hardly describe Lili. The most flowery language seems inadequate to convey the majesty of her charms. At first glance, I just felt that my whole body, my blood, everything in me blazed into flame. Even my hair seemed to shiver in the flames. Having never been in love before, the feeling was entirely novel to me. I felt intoxicated and could hardly stand straight or catch my breath.

She didn't see me at first. She was staring at those goldfish. Stars glittered under her long eyelashes and a pair of dimples danced on the moon of her face. Her mien as much excelled Helen in beauty as a dove does a raven. Overjoyed? Coquettish? Yearning? Surmising? She looked like the jade statue standing in the fountain and glistening with dewdrops of spring all over. She was the sun among the girls and she was the girl in the sun!

The manager realized almost at once what had happened. He returned and patted me on the shoulder, smiling.

"Fine," he said. "What uncanny eyesight you have, young man. She is our best product, our gold medal winner this year. She belongs to you now!" He took out a pen and signed a document, and before I had time to stop him, he called out, "Lili!"

This shook Lili from her rapture over the fish. She spun around obediently, and her eyes touched me with amazement. She quickly assessed both me and the manager, and a maidenly blush appeared suddenly painted on her cheeks. She hung her head and dared not hold it up again. Other robot girls in the vicinity laughed up their sleeves, for they knew that I, a young man in glowing health, had come for just one possible reason.

The manager walked over and handed her the pink card. "Extend your hand," he ordered.

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She still hung her head on her chest. She dared not look out from behind those long lashes to examine me. She looked as if she wanted to find a place to hide herself for shame. But she extended her delicate little hand obediently.

The manager produced a jewel case from his pocket and took out a pair of engagement rings. He solemnly put one with a ruby on my finger and the other with an emerald on hers.

All the other robot girls gathered around, giggling, shouting, pushing, and shoving. No sooner had we put on the rings than cheers and music exploded from all around. A rain of flowers poured down like a waterfall. Rose, lilac, jasmine, red plum — red, yellow, purple, blue, white — all kinds of petals spilled over us and all over the ground. Lili and I were led away separately to change our clothes, bathe and dress up.

When I saw Lili again shortly afterward, she had cut her plaits, the symbol of her maidenhood, and had a permanent wave instead. Dressed in a gown with a long train, she stood in front of me, fair, slim, and graceful above all praise.

The Universal Robot Company released our marriage for a TV news broadcast immediately. Amidst the music of jubilation we were escorted by big crowds to the gate where our sedan had been decorated in wedding gaiety of colored streamers.

The manager kissed both of us on our foreheads. He liked old customs very much. Then he blessed us. "May you love each other and live to a ripe old age in conjugal happiness."

In the sedan I cast a glimpse at Lili. Just at that moment she happened to turn her eyes to steal a glance at me, too. She shivered with embarrassment, as if burnt, and turned her head hastily.

My head swam with intoxication.

Honeymoon

Our happiness as newly-weds was beyond description indeed!

Lili was so beautiful that anyone would fall into an abyss of love at a single glance at her. I often burned the midnight oil and she always sat beside me for company. Whenever I raised my eyelids and saw her, I would be completely relieved of any fatigue at once and I would remember an ancient verse:

> With fragrance emitting from her red sleeves,
> I read in the stillness of the night.

Maybe it was because there was so much love in my own eyes that hers often glistened with happy embarrassment. I finally began to realize the profound implications of the manager's description. Lili's character proved more beautiful than her appearance. She was docile and obedient to me and she

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cared for me with great solicitude. She was like a goddess in carriage and an angel in character.

She was so bright that she could search my mind with her clear beautiful eyes that seemed like limpid waters in spring. She would anticipate my wants, preparing my favorite dishes before I was hardly aware of my own desires. I almost felt that the strong fragrant love between us had already reached saturation.

Between us, I was the symbol of authority and she was the symbol of obedience. It became clear what the manager meant by "You'll be her monarch!"

Some people say that marriage is the final stage of love. But that's a lopsided view. Marriage is a higher stage of love.

During this period of time my work went on smoothly. The POT research project made headway at a miraculous pace, like a hot knife cutting through butter. My diligent work seemed at last to be ready to bear rich fruits. As my excitement grew, I cherished the special memory of the founder of this project, my teacher Professor Shi Chun. His last words, which he had repeated again and again on his deathbed, were, "We must find element number 109!"

At that moment all the heavy ion physicists the world over were following this track. With hard work and vigor, we would surely be the swiftest in the race and the first to score the goal.

But — alas!

A Bed of Roses

During this period of time, my eyes could only perceive Lili's strong points. Brushing aside all the shortcomings of the natural human girls, Lili possessed all their merits. In my mind's eye she was an angelic superideal wife, the acme of perfection.

She was obedient to me in the extreme. In this respect she possessed the strongest traits of Eastern women. Like women from ancient China, Japan, or Korea, she not only followed all my instructions unconditionally but also submitted to my mischiefs meekly. She was able to endure and undergo trials without being overwhelmed by them.

In order to test her obedience and see how far it would go, I deliberately threw some difficulties her way. For instance, I would not let her wash the saucers after a meal. Instead, I said (with a malicious smile), "Lick them clean, Lili!"

She took out a dish obediently, but pretended not to have heard me clearly. She watched me as if waiting for me to change my instructions. But I stuck like a limpet! I repeated my instruction, sort of begging: "Lick them clean, Lili!"

She was obliged to hold up the dish, and she stuck out her little tongue and licked off the dregs on the dish like a cat. Obviously feeling wronged,

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she stared at me with big eyes, but I hardened my heart. I just gave her a smile, a mischievous, elated, and contented smile. Before long she seemed to be glad, too.

After a while I played another trick on her. I said, "Meow like a cat, Lili." This time she didn't hesitate, though she stared at me with a strange, grieving look as if she were saying, "How tricky you are!"

She made a face and said, "Meow!" She imitated the animal perfectly, as if she were really a cat meowing.

For my part, I repaid her obedience with more of my passionate love.

We often played chess. She was a master chess player, I knew, because she had read many chess manuals. But she never beat me. Sometimes I made false moves to tempt her to triumph over me. But she just grinned and bore it without grumbling. She would watch my face intently, studying my expressions and adjusting her moves accordingly. When I looked impetuous, she would make false moves herself to let me turn defeat into victory with beaming smiles.

At first her generosity and attentiveness pleased me very much. Nonetheless, with the passage of time I gradually felt bored with the predictability of her behavior. I began to imagine that quarreling could be a pleasure, too. Just as the moon changed from crescent to full; just as seasons turned spring, summer, fall, and winter; just as a man who hated both hot summer and cold winter and eventually moved to a place with spring all year round would gradually feel the unchanging weather rather dull, I wanted some change — I wanted to quarrel. I wonder if I am the first man who ever felt this way?

I began to try to irritate her deliberately, just to see whether I could make her angry. Early in the morning, I extended my feet. She saw them and hurried over to put on socks and shoes for me. After she helped me to put on my clothes, she washed and shaved my face. It so happened that while she was shaving me, I felt an urge to sneeze. Thus I got a cut on my face, though it really wasn't her fault. I flew into a rage and slapped her across her face. Quietly she stood there, merely looking pitiful. Then I boxed her on the right cheek, and she turned the other cheek. She even forced a smile, shining through her tears in her eyes.

How well behaved she was!

And I really loved her!

But I did not believe that she would never get angry.

Once when I turned around and inadvertently knocked down a crystal cup, I picked a quarrel with her willfully. I cursed her angrily and accused her of having no brains to have put the crystal cup there in the first place. I chose the most stinging words and called her a rotten robot without proper parental upbringing.

And how did she react? The tears trickled down from her eyes. While tidying things up, she made repeated apologies. How pitiable! I couldn't

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help feeling sorry for her and ashamed of myself for my unreasonable temper. I hastened to coax her with honeyed words till she burst into laughter.

What else could I do with her? Never would she get angry.

Now I truly learned the power of Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics!

Ever since her production she had never learned to talk back or quarrel. She was the obedient mud, a combination of obedient water with obedient earth. Her character was composed of ninety-nine percent obedience, plus one more percent obedience.

Nevertheless, I myself had changed a lot. I could no longer keep my temper. As I was the autocrat at home, I felt that nothing outside my home fell in with my wishes and no people were pleasing to my eyes. I found that those natural human beings in the research institute, in the lab, and in the service counter were all very rude, wanton, savage, arrogant, haughty, and ugly beyond description. The more I saw Lili as lovely, the more I perceived the others as disgusting. The nearer I drew to Lili, the farther I kept from others.

Thus, I liked to stay more and more at home and found the office dirty, disorderly, and filled with filthy, unbreathable air. I spent less and less time in the research institute.

At home Lili treated me with rose water, but outside everyone and everything seemed to oppose me. One day, I drove my car downtown. When I reached the commercial district, the road became narrow. I pressed my horn all the time, but the cars in front would not give way. I got so furious that I sped up in an attempt to overtake other cars on the road. Who would have thought that I'd bump against a car on the left? And that I'd scratch off some of the paint on my car that way? I stopped my car immediately and had a quarrel with that driver. And when a police officer finally arrived on the scene and questioned the witnesses, to my great surprise and indignation, she fined me!

To make matters worse, when I got to work, my superior was waiting to have a private talk with me.

"You've become lazy, arrogant, rash, and eccentric in recent days, especially since you've married," he accused me. "You're the chief person in charge of the POT research project, so what happens to you personally can affect the whole project, which is just about to bear fruit. All the other research workers are carrying on their respective duties on double shifts while you come here only half the time."

Of course, I had to act contrite in front of my superior, but I was greatly annoyed at heart. Weren't they jealous of my wife's beauty and virtue? Weren't they jealous of our conjugal happiness?

Could it be her fault? Poor Lili!

That talk had the opposite effect of my superior's intentions, deepening the gap between my co-workers and me. I gradually discovered the fundamental difference between natural human beings and robots — they were

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different in soul.

The other half of Newton's Law worked between me and them now. The greater the distance, the less the attraction; and the less the attraction, the greater the distance, in geometric progression by the square of the ever increasing distance. The centripetal force increased between Lili and me while the centrifugal force increased between the institute and me. One was a vicious circle and the other a benign circle. With their respective speeds getting faster and faster, they both advanced toward their respective critical points.

My superior's words had not sobered me up. On the contrary, the incident made me even more estranged from my colleagues and leading cadres. And it even affected my philosophy. I began to have doubts about the prospects of natural human beings and human society. I became a pessimist, and a skeptic, too.

I wondered if some day natural human beings would be replaced by intelligent and beautiful robots, who were becoming more and more advanced. Evolution was a slow process for natural human beings. Mankind had walked with a slow and heavy step for four thousand years and reached only its present level of intelligence, whereas in just a few decades artificial minds had progressed from the primitive ENIAC and had already caught up and surpassed the intelligence level of modern humanity. Moreover, it was so much easier to turn out robots and to program them with all the proper behavior. Robots were so clever, so kindhearted, so docile, and so easy to rule over that they would never touch off a war, stir up a riot, form a conspiracy, plot a subversion, or stage a coup d'état. They would need no army or violence. They would cut down military expenditures from astronomical figures to nothing.

My conclusion was: sooner or later human beings would be replaced by robots; mankind would lose out completely in the struggle for existence and fundamental changes would take place in human society.

I sank into degradation in my conjugal happiness.

Degradation

Things developed and changed continually. Previously I had been a heavy smoker. Then I found smoking impaired my health seriously; I was afflicted with bronchitis in particular. So I began to control the amount of my smoking. I bought a specially-made cigarette case which had a timer. It rolled out only one cigarette every two hours. In this way I was able to cut down to four or five cigarettes a day.

After I adopted this measure, my health improved very much. But I must admit that I suffered terribly from the deprivation. Sometimes I sighed at the stingy cigarette case.

Lili was so smart that she knew my secret.

So, she surreptitiously found the key to the cigarette case and brought it

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with her quietly. Whenever she saw me frown at the cigarette case, she would put the key in front of me on the sly while stealthily observing the expressions on my face with her diamond-like ebony eyes.

See what a good wife she was!

And that was not all.

Wine was my favorite drink. I could not live without it. However, I had been moderate in drinking as in smoking, two small cups of mild grape wine at noon every day.

I knew quite well that biological phenomena were without exception forms of the movement of electricity. The ultramicro-bioluminescence of the human body, the bioelectric current, the biomagnetic field, psi powers: they were all forms of electrobiology. Because of the above mentioned theory, I had a special inclination for wine. To me, drinking was like charging a battery. But I also knew that the coil would be damaged if the electric current was too great. That would cause the brain to discharge too much electricity. Excessive drinking would do harm to my heart. Therefore, I controlled my intake of the attractive substance very strictly and conscientiously.

Nonetheless, as good wine was tempting, mellow, fragrant, sweet, refreshing, stimulating, exciting — anyone fond of drinking would understand that it was altogether too attractive to be stopped.

And my addiction to alcohol didn't escape Lili's keen eyes, made all the sharper by saturation of love.

At supper, when I saw the delicacies she had prepared for me with her own dainty hands, I couldn't help turning my eyes toward the wine bottles in the cupboard. How nice it would be to have a cup or two, I thought.

Again, she read my mind and brought over a bottle. The more I drank, Lili soon learned, the more I laughed; and the more I laughed, the more pleased was Lili.

For all her observation, however, Lili never seemed to notice other changes in me. I saw fewer and fewer smiling faces in the research institute because my efficiency at work fell sharply.

But at any rate, the POT research project was drawing to its final stages and we held a safe lead in such projects in the world. So I still felt at ease. The final draft of the manuscript was being completed, one page after another, and the thesis gathered volume bit by bit.

Again it was the season for maples to turn red.

Fall, fall of rich fruits, fall of golden spectrums!

Nightmare

A double blessing was soon to descend upon my home.

One for the success of the POT research project, the other for the anniversary of my marriage with Lili.

Xinhua News Agency sent us its press release reporting the achievements

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of the POT research project. It fully affirmed the great significance of this research and also affirmed my personal contribution to it. Reading this news release, I felt so excited that tears welled up in my eyes, thinking of the painstaking work of scientists of several generations who had been willing ladders for others to climb up and willing cobblestones to pave the way.

Lili had been looking forward to this day with eager expectancy every day, too. This day finally arrived and it happened to coincide with my holiday.

Early in the morning with the sun just rising, Lili and I had already dressed ourselves smartly. We attached a light boat with an outboard motor to our car and packed a picnic lunch for the back seat and sped off for the seashore.

The sky looked intensely blue. The sun shone in all its splendid beauty. The sea was very gentle, with tiny peaceful waves brushing the shore. Out on the water in our boat, we sped along on the tips of the highest waves like an arrow, sprinkling the sea with our songs and laughter. The soft breeze extended her arms to hold us two and the white clouds pressed their tender cheeks close to our chests. Soaring to great heights, seagulls welcomed us while merrily singing petrels chased after us as if to capture some of our happiness.

When we became hungry, we stopped on a beautiful coral island to dine. Afterward we napped on the warm sandy beach.

We did not return home until the setting sun had settled into the quilt of evening mist, birds had returned to the depths of the thick woods, and the moon sprayed her glittering splendor, while the stars blinked their curious eyes and trailed us for company.

All day long we had had only the picnic on the small island. Now back at home we both felt hungry. Luckily, there was enough food in the refrigerator, and Lili was an able housewife. Half an hour later, a lavish supper was ready.

I took up the winecup and smelled a sweet, intense whiff of fragrance. I looked at the winecup and realized that Lili had exchanged the grape wine for strong gold-award brandy without my notice. As I raised my gaze, I met her diamond-like black eyes; she was watching me quietly, intently, passionately.

What is happiness?

What is love?

That glittering pair of diamond eyes were the answer. That pair of eyes were more intoxicating than good wine; good wine didn't care who drank it. Her eyes were filled with love, only for me.

I drank one cup after another. I emptied one bottle and sent her to fetch another. I resolved to drink for once to my heart's content. I resolved to drink my fill of the full cup of happiness.

The cup was filled with happiness;

The cup was filled with youthfulness;

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The cup was filled with joy;
The cup was filled with love:
How could anyone stop drinking from it?

I got dead drunk — how could I have avoided it? I saw Lili through my alcoholic haze, but the expression on her face was horrified. I began to realize that I was probably quite drunk. I tried to comfort her, stuttering, "I . . . I'm not . . . not drunk. I'm not . . . broken. Not sleep . . . I . . ."

For reasons unknown to me, I got tongue-tied and couldn't pronounce the word *drunk*.

But as my tongue got thick, my mind sharpened in an interesting way. I suddenly remembered that I had bought a new gadget the day before. It was to be a gift for Lili. I had been so happy all day that it had simply slipped my mind. It was a "mirage" lighter. Switch it on and burn a sheet of paper with it, and the lighter's flame would intertwine with the flare of the burning paper and project all kinds of mirages. They were uncannily wonderful visions, indeed!

I demonstrated it for her. She was greatly amused and could not be more pleased. I had her passing sheets of paper to me and I burnt them one by one for her to watch.

Many characters in myths and legends appeared in the flames. The Warsaw Mermaid, the pretty Muses, the monster Sphinx with the head of a woman and the body of a lion, the king of gods Jupiter and his son the god of fire Vulcan, the frightful Medusa with serpents for her hair — Lili did not see her because I blindfolded her eyes when Medusa appeared. I told Lili that she should not watch Medusa because mortals who gazed upon her face would be turned to stone.

Oh, there was more — the frightful three-headed and three-bodied moon goddess Hecate who ruled over devils and demons, groups of green-faced and long-toothed ferocious ghosts and spectres always gathered about her.

Lili shrieked with fear and crawled beside me. She shivered all over, almost out of her senses with horror. When I turned off the lighter, there were no more mirages cropping up. After a while, when she calmed down, she asked me to turn on the lighter again because the temptation was great and she wanted to see more. Of course, I did it, and soon all kinds of mirages appeared again in the midst of fire and smoke.

Carefully I watched Lili, now more interested in her reaction than in the mirages themselves. Though covering her face with her little hands, she stole glances from the cracks between her tiny fingers.

Fortunately for her, no more ferocious ghosts or monsters appeared now. Here were charming ladies from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor.*

Like a pair of little simpletons, we two laughed and burned, burned and laughed.

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I faintly remember that when there was no more paper to burn I asked her to open the drawer of my desk, throwing her the key. There was plenty of paper there.

As she had so many times before, Lili hesitated before following my orders.

"You filthy baggage," I shouted at her. "Just when I think you really love me, you give me a hard time and don't want to follow my lead. Will you never make me your complete lord and master?"

She hesitated only a moment before she passed me a thick ream of paper.

Again we two laughed and burned, burned and laughed, till I hung my head, collapsed on the sofa, and fell fast asleep.

The Misfortune

When I got up in the morning, it was already eight o'clock. Lili had got up earlier and put everything in good order. As usual, beside my pillow were clean neat clothes she had ironed, and on the table was steaming hot breakfast.

After breakfast I was about to go to the office. This was to be the day the POT research project was to be made public and would no doubt go down in history.

I took up my portfolio and thought that I must put on some grand airs while handing in the thesis on the POT research project to the director of the research institute in person. The announcement of the research achievements would shake the whole world. It would proclaim: between Element No. 106 and Element No. 114, there was not just a channel; there was also an island — Element No. 109!

And the miraculous Element No. 109 enjoyed a long life, not 10^{-14} second as some people had predicted. In addition, it would provide humanity with an almost limitless supply of cheap, non-polluting energy. This would make a new epoch in nuclear physics and become an important milestone in modern physics.

It would proclaim: after the solution to the population crisis, mankind had eventually found the solution to the energy crisis, too. This would be one of the greatest scientific achievements of all time.

This was the rich fruit we at the 109 Research Section had reaped after five years' painstaking work. I was the deputy section leader on this project and the section leader had been my teacher Shi Chun. After his death, he continued to be listed as section leader, just as if he were still alive.

All night I had been dreaming of the news reports on our POT research project, the top story of the front pages of all the newspapers. I remembered seeing flowers and congratulatory letters and telegrams flying toward me like snowflakes. I remembered the humiliation I felt when the director of my research institute had dressed me down without justification. In those dreams I'd seen the frozen face of the director melt into ripples of smiles.

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Now it was high time for me to give vent to the pent-up sulks of those days. I was intoxicated with my wishful thinking.

With a dreaming smile, I opened the drawer of my desk to take out the thesis which would change the world and bring me recognition and respect in every country and at home in the Middle Kingdom of China.

But I stood, as if stricken with a bolt from the blue, transfixed with horror.

The drawer was empty!

What was this all about?

I asked Lili where my thesis was. Lili was so horrified by the expression on my face that she could utter no words. I tried my best to keep calm and asked again.

"Don't be afraid, Lili. Tell me where my paper is."

Lili cried out with fear. With tears in her eyes now she said, "Didn't you burn it up last night?"

Heavens! I burned it up last night — let me think it over.

Did I?

Yes, I did burn paper to amuse her.

I was in a cold sweat. Burned it up last night — good heavens!

Facing the Consequences

Now, of course, it was only a matter of time till the notes could be reconstructed and our report finished once again for presentation to the world. But it was that very day that we had already announced to the world that we would have it ready, ready to stun the whole world with our findings of element 109. And the reporters and dignitaries were at that very moment in their homes enjoying their breakfast, looking forward to a grand and glorious day for science and for China. My shame would be their shame as well, for many foreigners would be covering the day's festivities — all of which would be completely spoiled.

How I lived through that day I'll never know. I only remember snatches of it, my mind having mercifully blanked out the rest. I recall my superior's bushy eyebrows furrowing together in the center till they seemed to be a single black drape of mourning and I recall my own inability to explain beyond making absolutely clear that the damage had been done.

I have only a fuzzy memory too of the next few days and weeks, bearing the daily silence from all my co-workers. I would much rather they had accused me as I accused myself again and again, rather have faced their insults than their silent, intolerant scorn. I would have welcomed a struggle with them, but they were all now busily putting the report back together and they ignored me with an icy silence that sliced to my heart. The entire mood of the lab had shifted from enthusiastic optimism to a grim, methodical grind.

But I have a mercilessly clear memory of the day, just thirty days after we should have made our announcement, when the word came from the USSR:

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a wonderful discovery had been made in their labs in Leningrad and East Berlin — the long-awaited element 109 would be given to the world by professors who used the Cyrillic alphabet and who would have the prerogative to give it their alien, unpronounceable name, by which the rest of the world would call it for all time. The element that should have borne the name of my beloved professor Shi Chun — how would I ever face him in the afterlife!

Though no formal actions were taken against me at the moment of my shame, my colleagues at the lab now circulated a petition and called for my suspension from my post. There were the signatures of ten research fellows and associate research fellows and twenty postgraduates and over a hundred lab technicians. Without exception, they all signed. How could I blame them? I honestly believe I would have signed it too had anyone been speaking to me enough to ask me to do so. My superior spoke not a word as he presented it to me. They no longer cared to have me in their daily presence. To tell the truth, I was relieved myself to be released from the penance of facing them each day.

Awakening

It was time now for me to think over carefully what the root cause was for all this.

I returned home at a foot-dragging pace. Leaning against me, Lili cried her heart out. But I drove her away and shut myself up inside my bedroom. Outside Lili crawled on the ground and pounded on the door. I could hear her cries, but my heart became as cold as stone.

Bitterly, I tried to trace the path of my downfall. Of course, I knew it had been my own fault because I had been weak-willed. But hadn't Lili freed me from giving up smoking? Consequently, I grew weaker and weaker physically and was no longer able to control myself. Hadn't Lili lifted the prohibition on my excessive drinking? As a result, I drank to excess and committed a crime. Hadn't Lili substituted brandy for grape wine? Consequently, I got drunk, so dead drunk that I lost my senses and was unable to extricate myself from the crime.

It was Lili who had, on the quiet, opened all locked gates with her delicate hands. It was Lili who had changed all traffic lights to green on the sly. How terrible it was, Lili!

It seemed an accidental disaster at first glance. But to get at the root of the matter, it was by no means accidental. As the saying goes, where water flows, a channel is formed. Just imagine if one night all the railways, all the forks in the roads, and all the airfields had green traffic lights only. How many wreckages and how many deaths would occur!

I had lost my senses when the disaster happened, but she had been sane all the time.

Yes, it was I who had ordered her to fetch the paper for me from the

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drawer. She was unable to tell a lie because she had not been programmed to lie. She would rather be beaten than deceive me. This I knew. She was unable to remember wrongly because her memory was as reliable as the inscription etched on a bronze tripod. I had issued the order, but I was dead drunk at that moment, whereas she was clear-headed.

Yes, she knew nothing but to obey absolutely and unconditionally. She has been programmed to do so ever since her creation. And that program was originated by that American Isaac Asimov!

I recalled what the general manager of the Universal Robot Company had told me: "Unlike an independent person, she will seem to be an extension of your physical being." And: "Like your hands and feet, she'll always be at your disposal."

Bitterly, I remembered how delicious that had sounded at the time. But now, I realized that she was more at my disposal than my hands and feet. When I was dead drunk, my hands and feet betrayed me. They no longer obeyed my orders. They conducted themselves in their own ways. But Lili kept on carrying out my orders, no matter how crazy, until they brought ruin upon me!

Good heavens! It was too terrible to think about!

I began to realize how terrible the absolute obedience, the angelic beauty, the excessive tenderheartedness were. I began to realize what would happen when a man was unable to distinguish and control his own actions. I had once felt proud and rejoiced that we two had shared one mind, and I had even thought it to be the first key element of my happy marriage. Now I realized that it was the very cause of my tragedy.

A hundred acts of obedience — damn them! I began to realize how terrible, how hateful, and how disgusting they were. That terrible obedience had doomed my career, my reputation — everything.

I have decided now that I must part with Lili; otherwise I might do even worse next time. It is not too late to repair the sheepfold even after some of the sheep have been lost, as the old Chinese saying goes.

Now I know that a natural human wife is much better than a robot wife because the former has her own thoughts and views. She is an independent person. She knows not only how to love her husband but also how to restrict him at a critical moment. She is endowed with the admirable, noble, lovable, crowning pearl of character: the ability to quarrel!

I have resolved to send Lili back to the Universal Robot Company. I have resolved to divorce my robot wife — that's the only way out.

In all fairness, Lili is very pitiable. She is not guilty. She is too good-natured and too kindhearted. The person who must be blamed is none other than Isaac Asimov. Although his Three Laws of Robotics have a reasonable kernel, they also have the seeds of their own damnation.

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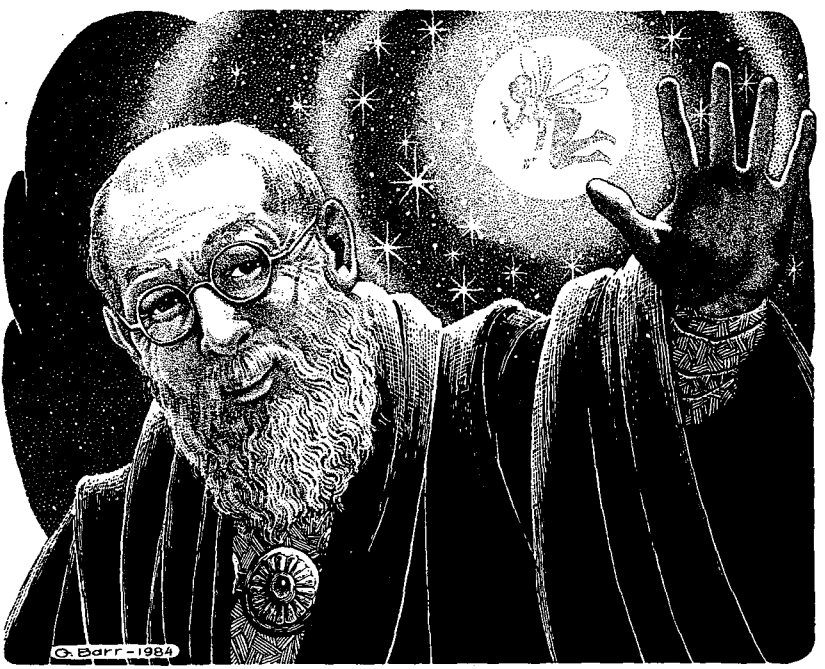
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NEXT YEAR IN BRIGADOON

by Greg Cox
art: George Barr



Occasion: the 1983 WorldCon. "I told you there were some weirdos around," said a mother to her boy as some folk in perfectly normal Viking garb rowed a completely ordinary longship into Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Greg Cox, who has worked on four VikingCons, gives us this story of a truly fantastical convention.

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This year the Convention was held on Skull Island, north of the Wall. The hotel rested amongst the jungle foliage. A tyrannosaur growled at the lighted windows.

Within, Prospero the magician, one-time Duke of Milan, scowled. "Enough!" he cried. "I am not come to listen to the bellowing of beasts." He seized his staff and spun it in his hands. "Enough!" he repeated.

Now, it has been written that Prospero *must* someday relinquish his arts and powers. Indeed, he has done so many times — and will many times again. The Convention, however, is situated beyond the boundaries of Plot.

Thus, the snarling ceased.

" 'Tis better," said he, "harsh sounds will no more enter this chamber. You may continue, friend spirit."

A ball of starlight replied, filling the suite with bell-like music.

"Is it truly so urgent?" the magician asked.

An emphatic chime.

"Very well, Tinkerbell," Prospero sighed, "tell Peter I shall be with him presently."

The door swung open of itself, and the starball flew off down the carpeted hallway. The walls, neatly painted silver, glowed as she passed.

Prospero crossed the room and entered an adjoining chamber. He found his daughter gazing through an open window.

"Did you see the dragon, Father?" Miranda asked.

"I heard it," he replied.

"It was a wonder!" enthused the girl. Prospero could not help smiling. She was fifteen, and lovely.

"Perhaps," he said, "but now, Miranda, mark me well. I must inform you of the present circumstances. Some small business requires my attention, therefore I must leave you for a time."

"Now? 'Tis late," she said.

"Two glasses past eight, at least," he agreed. "For that reason, I would see thee in bed ere I depart."

"If you say so, Father," said Miranda, coming away from the window.

"I do," he said. "First and foremost, I am thy guardian. Before pursuing any other matter, I must be confident that you are well and secure." Gently, he pulled the sheets over her.

"I shall return soon," he promised.

"Excuse me, sir," said the man in the top hat, "can you tell me the way to the Greystoke suite?"

Prospero pointed to the direction from which he had come. "Continue down this corridor," he advised, "and you are sure to find it. Merely listen for the barks and howls."

"Thank you sincerely," said John Dolittle, M.D.

Clad in a robe of crimson, Prospero continued on his way. He was anxious

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to conclude this night's business. After all, he was not a young man. He leaned on his staff for a moment and considered the velvet gloves that held it. They were completely grey, exactly as his hair was. For a brief interval, he recalled his island home. Its quiet harmony and gentle music seemed very far away.

Suddenly, he heard the bagpipes. Ten pipes, at the least, wailing away with dour enthusiasm. For a second there, Prospero feared that the union of an elephant with a banshee had produced offspring.

But is was no monstrous hybrid he heard, only a Highland marching band which presently rounded the corner. A dozen pipers, in red and green kilts, strode past the startled wizard, followed by two more individuals, similarly garbed. These latter two proudly held aloft a cloth banner which read, **NEXT YEAR IN BRIGADOON!**

Next year, Prospero thought. That could be interesting. Heather, hills, fog; all very different from his own Mediterranean haunts.

Still, next year was next year. The present Convention remained the immediate concern. For the first time, the rightful Duke of Milan wondered why he had been summoned. By tradition, Prospero's sole responsibility at these functions was to deliver the closing address ("Our revels now are ended, etc."), though he invariably ended up doing more work than he had intended — in the manner of all conventions.

The Pan boy held the office of Con-Troubleshooter this year: that Prospero knew. What had gone wrong this time, he wondered. Fervently, Prospero prayed that Talbot had not eaten the guest-of-honor again. Or that Pandora had left her damn box at home! Prospero quickened his step, the sooner to hear the awful news from Peter.

Con HQ was relatively quiet when Prospero arrived. Only the treasurer, Midas, was present, busily counting the registration fees. No adolescents, flying or otherwise, could be seen.

"Where is Peter?" inquired Prospero.

"I have no idea," Midas muttered. His eyes never left the coins in front of him.

"But I was told to meet him here," protested the wizard. "The sprite said it was urgent."

"Sorry," Midas said.

"Why was I summoned?" asked Prospero.

"Zeus only knows!" The greedy king of avarice arose from his chair. "I am responsible for gold, not wayward boys. If you want information, try that mob of women around the corner. Good luck! Good-bye!"

Prospero was tempted to curse the old miser. He did not. That would have been redundant. Wearily, he left in search of more helpful guides.

"Have you seen Peter? Of Neverland?" he asked the women.

"No," replied Rapunzel.

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"Not I," answered Alice.

"Peter who?" asked Carmilla.

Alas, they could not help him. Neither could Snow White, Echo, Gretel, or Esmeralda.

"Ladies," queried Prospero, "curiosity compels me to ask: For what reason are all of you standing in a line?"

Gretel pointed to a sign that read, "Ladies."

"But why so long a line?" asked the magician. "What is the source of the delay?"

Carmilla answered, acidly: "We're waiting for Lady Macbeth to finish washing her hands."

"Two hours, so far," added Alice.

Prospero knocked on the door of Peter's room. There was no answer. Grey eyes, directed by an inquiring mind, scanned the rug at the foot of the door. Prospero could see no light shining through the crack 'twixt door and floor. No one was home.

Damn that boy, the wizard thought. How dare he disappear like this? Peter was careless, that's what he was! Not to mention irresponsible and absent-minded. That boy, Prospero lamented, would forget his own shadow if it wasn't stuck on!

Come to think of it, sometimes he forgot it anyway.

"Oh well," Prospero sighed. His sense of duty required that he see this through. There was no choice but to make an extended tour of the Convention. Peter had to be somewhere.

First stop, the hotel pool:

The water was filled with mermen, undines, and very little else. In one corner, though, Prospero saw Morgan Le Fay conferring with the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

"There is this lake, you see," said the witch, "and the sword is in the lake . . ."

Some people never give up, thought Prospero.

But Peter wasn't there.

Next stop, the banquet hall:

No guests were present yet. The first feast was still hours away. At the end of a long table, a team of workers was putting together a giant chair of bizarre design. Prospero examined the amorphous structure, looking in vain for a recognizable feature — or even a right angle. Intrigued, he glanced at the namecard on the table. It read, "The Dunwich Horror."

Of course.

But still no sign of Peter.

* * *

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The ballroom:

The Phantom sat at his organ. His thin, white fingers caressed the keyboard while his eyes, cavernous as ever, gleamed with exultation. The familiar melodies of "The Lobster Quadrille" sounded, directing the graceful movements of attending couples. Pinocchio was there, dancing with the Blue Fairy. The Tin Woodman waltzed hand-in-hand with Aphrodite. He clanked a little, but no so badly as Jacob Marley, who was sharing the floor with She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed. Ayesha winked at Prospero as he entered.

Prospero saw She's wink. He smiled, and remembered. Two years ago, in Pellucidar.

Suddenly, he remembered why he came to these conventions.

Peter, however, was not among the dancers.

The hospitality room:

Utter chaos. A dozen or so people, characters all, occupied an assortment of couches, tables, and chairs. Near the punch bowl, Rip Van Winkle slept contentedly. As usual.

Prospero's tired eyes travelled from face to face. There was Dr. Lao, trading notes with Mary Poppins. Next to them, Dorian Gray was flirting with the Moon Maid. He saw Im-Ho-Tep, Doc Savage, and the Loch Ness Monster.

But not Peter.

A wolf-like cry assailed his ears. Prospero turned, and a naked boy with wild, black hair ran past him. A steaming leg of lamb was held tight between the boy's teeth.

"Thief!" shouted a Valkyrie. "Come back, boy, or I'll feed your head to the birds!" The gargantuan blonde swung her sword in a fierce arc, the flat connecting with Bacchus, who spilled his wine on St. George. The knight swore vengeance, a dragon roared, the Cheshire Cat grinned, and Thumbelina ran for cover. Van Winkle *almost* woke up.

Chaos was in danger of becoming Riot.

Lightning flashed.

Thunder roared.

Prospero spoke.

"Silence!" he said. "Peace! Must I bring forth a greater tempest to secure your attention?"

Sword in hand, the Valkyrie froze. So did all the rest. Then Prospero continued:

"Mowgli, return that portion of meat. You must remember, this is not the Indian jungle. Here, in this hotel, you must adjust your behavior to accommodate the others. We all must.

"Brunhilde, put away your wrath. Surely you can remember — and forgive — the folly of youth, the rashness of the young. Boys will be boys, even

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in the highest realms of Imagination.

"All of you, remember: Why do we yearly come together like this, if not to take pleasure in each other's company? Why, if not to savor our differences, to appreciate the quirks and traits that make each of us memorable. We are none of us perfect — no, not even you, Narcissus — and thus we must be tolerant. If we are to enjoy each other's personalities, we must also accept the faults that come with them — like a wolf-boy's lack of manners, for example."

Exhausted from his speech, Prospero leaned silently against his staff. It still smelled faintly of ozone. Around him, the gentle murmur of five or six conversations gradually resumed.

"Enough," the old man whispered, "I have done my share tonight."

Prospero turned on the lights in the living room, then locked the door to his suite. Soon, he would be able to sleep. His bones ached for bed.

First, though, there was Miranda. He wanted to check on her. How long had he been away? Two hours, perhaps.

Slowly, quietly, he eased open her door and peered in. His daughter was just as he had left her, resting safely in her bed. He could hear the muffled rhythm of breaths. She was asleep. A last, wary region of the wizard's heart relaxed. All was well.

He started to close the door, then he saw it. There was something on the floor near Miranda's bed. The room was dark, but the edge of an unknown object intruded into the moonlight on the floor.

Prospero entered the chamber and felt a chilly draft come through the open window. He closed the curtains, then knelt to inspect the unaccountable mystery by the bed.

It was a wad of darkness, like a crumpled ball of filmy cloth. Already, Prospero suspected its origin. Cautiously, being careful not to tear the delicate film, he spread out this thin layer of darkness on the moonlit floor.

Before his eyes, the shadow revealed its shape. There, on the floor, was the silhouette of two slim forms, embracing.

The phrase, "wild-goose chase," came to Prospero's mind.

"Oh well," he said once again, "boys will be boys."

He sighed, smiled, and silently left Miranda to her dreams. As ever, 'gainst his fury, nobler Reason prevailed.

The revels went on and on.

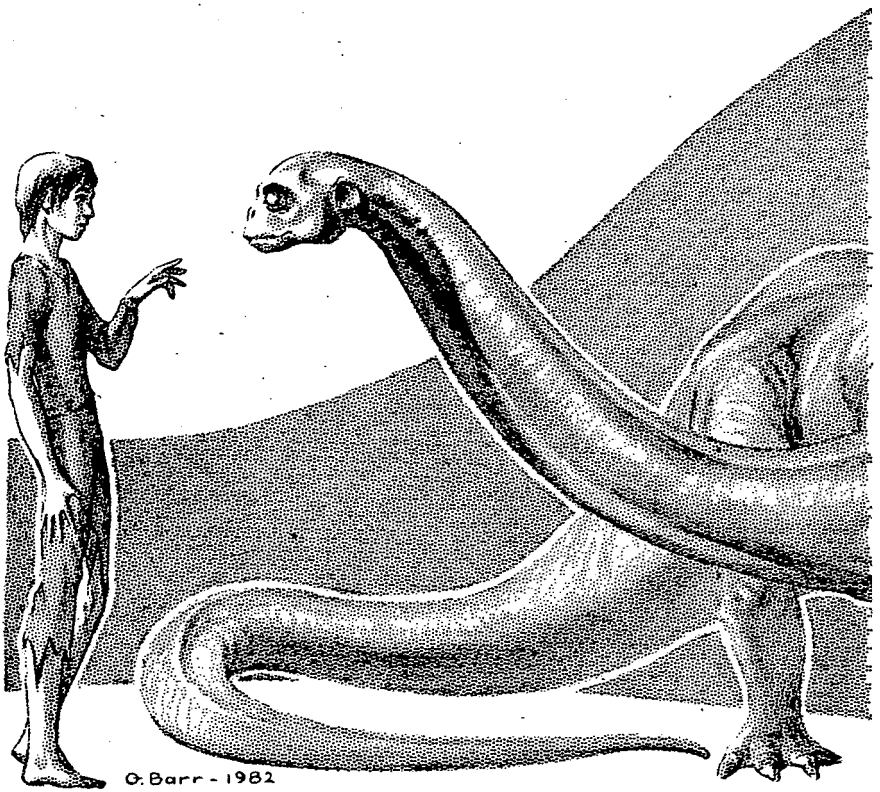


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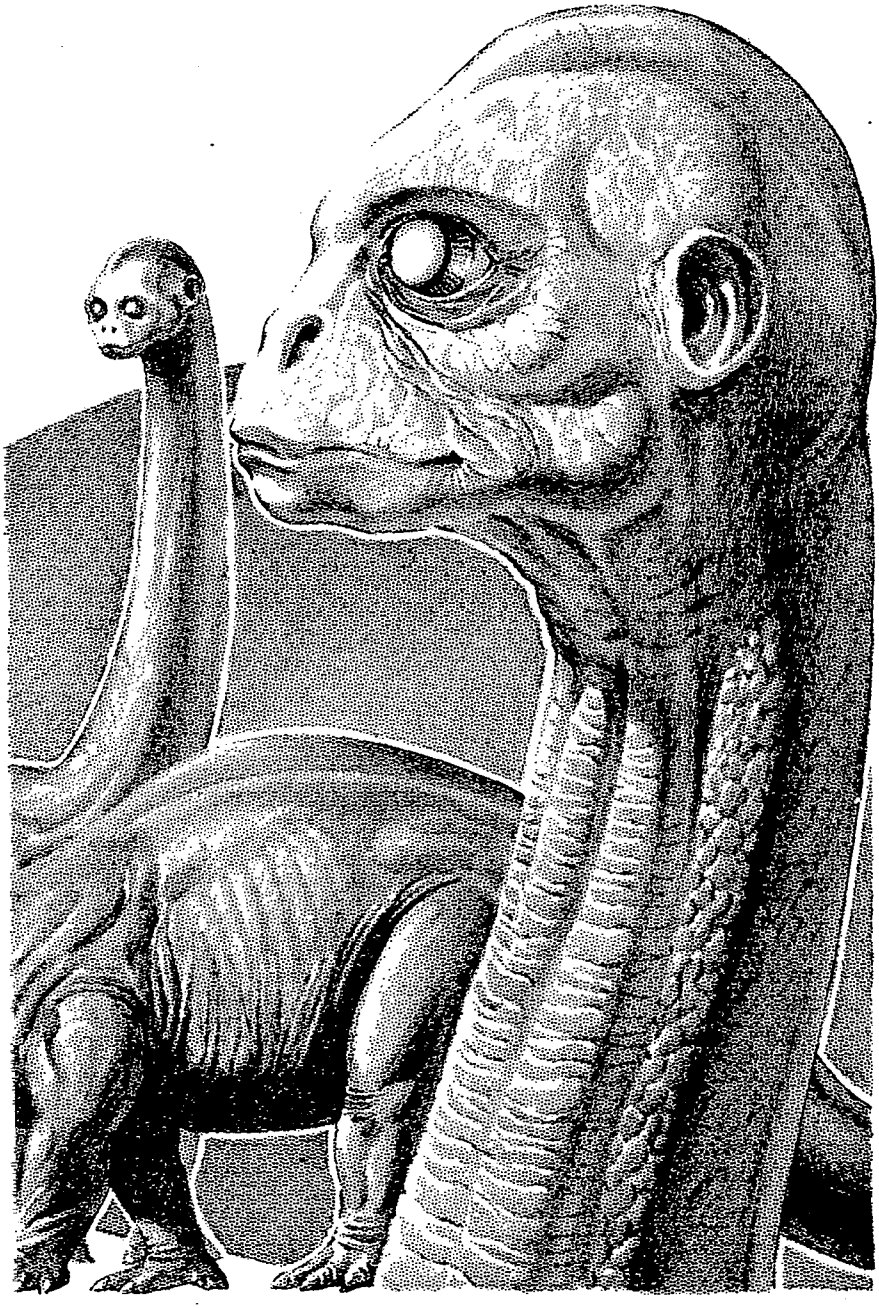
CHILDREN OF THE CENTAUR

by Lisa Tuttle

art: George Barr



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The settlement of Dawnlight smelled of dust and feathers. There were awkward flappings and rushing blurs of blue and white as startled birds left their perches, and the pale yellow dirt puffed up in tiny clouds from the roads as hopping, fist-sized creatures made for the shadows.

The intruders — seven people — looked around uneasily at the deserted buildings. The air was heavy with undisturbed silence and sunlight. Bird-droppings mottled the walls, changing the too-bright colors, making their pinks, blues and yellows more possibly a part of the landscape. Bird nests, and the fragile traps and homes of insects, softened the man-made angles. Nature, with the assistance of time, was absorbing the town, altering its alienness.

The local creatures had obviously accepted it as a part of the landscape, as if it were no more than a tumble of rocks thrown up in some planetary disturbance.

They don't expect the humans back, thought Bril Svboda. The birds and the insects know they're gone for good.

But where?

He glanced at the others, all frozen, like himself, on the outer circle of the settlement known as Dawnlight, momentarily reluctant to penetrate deeper, afraid of what they might find.

Chandra Ti-Bas, leader of the expedition, caught Bril's wandering eye and spoke to the group. Her voice, clear, deep and resonant, broke the momentary spell which had held them.

"The floater-probes found nothing," she said. "That doesn't mean there was nothing to find. Although indications are that Dawnlight is empty of everything but these frightened birds and harmless insects, truly we don't know what we may find inside. We must all be on our guard, remembering that this is a strange, possibly very dangerous place.

"Something happened to the first settlers, after all. We want to find out what happened, but we don't want to fall victim to it ourselves. Be careful, take all precautions . . ." she hesitated, staring thoughtfully at two figures, a woman and a girl. By the way they stood it was obvious that they did not consider themselves a natural part of the group.

"Sulea," said Chandra, speaking to the woman, "If you and Dara would like to wait . . ." But she had said the same thing back at the ship, where waiting might have been sensible, and they had refused.

"We're coming," said Sulea in a colorless tone, just as she had said the first time.

Chandra sighed, and caught Bril's eye. He gave her back an almost imperceptible nod. Yes, he would keep a sharp lookout for those two unpredictable members of the group.

"Let's go," said Chandra, and she turned and led the way. Dawnlight had been built on a treeless plateau about two kilometers from the calm, golden-brown ocean. To the north was forest; east and south stretched

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flat, grassy plains the colonists would eventually have turned to use as farmland. But the colonists had not stayed long enough for that.

The settlers had built their town of synthetic materials. The houses were small and similar in design, prefabricated to be thrown up in a day. They were in pastel shades of pink, yellow and blue. The birds and other small animals living in Dawnlight now had left more of a mark upon the bland sameness of the town than had the lost colonists.

As Chandra led the others deeper into the rows of small buildings (the streets spiralled out from a central plaza) they all began, subtly, to relax. There were no bodies here, no signs of bloodshed, no lurking enemies, no obvious danger. From the looks of the quiet, tidy houses, everyone had simply walked out one day, never to return.

Over 450 people had been on the first colonial expedition to the planet known as Bright Angel. Where had all those men, women, and children gone?

Bril noticed that Sulea and Dara were hanging back from the others, and he too fell back to watch them. After a few minutes they began walking in decidedly the opposite direction from the rest of the group. Bril followed.

Sulea Avransdatter and Dara, her 'pathic child, intrigued Bril. Throughout the long space voyage to Bright Angel, he had made repeated attempts to get to know them, attempts that were forever frustrated or simply ignored. They did not belong on this expedition at all: it was in compassion for Sulea, and admiration for her famous mother, that Chandra Ti-Bas had allowed the pair to join the expedition.

Sulea was the daughter of Avran Riis, a nearly legendary explorer, and most recently a member of the Dawnlight colony. She had been the first to explore Bright Angel, and knew more about the planet than any other human. Yet Sulea knew no more about Bright Angel than anyone else — still, Bril could understand Chandra's decision.

What he could not understand was why Sulea had wanted to come.

Sulea and Dara were joined together in total, empathic contact. Together, they were one unit, self-contained and aloof from the rest of the world. Bril knew what 'pathic sharing was, and he could not understand what had brought Sulea and Dara to Bright Angel when the only world they cared about was encompassed in the circle of their joined minds.

Bril made no attempt to hide himself or stay out of hearing as he followed, but the two figures ahead never turned to look back and seemed totally unaware of his presence. They approached a small blue house, with the name AVRAN RIIS picked out in chips of pink stone to the left of the door.

Flapping wildly, alarmed by their approach, a large white bird flew out of the window. Sulea turned, watching the bird, and saw Bril. Her face tightened.

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"Why do you follow me around!"

Dara turned now and also watched Bril. She had her mother's brown eyes, but in her face they appeared flat and inscrutable; they did not shine as her mother's did. Bril had never seen her reveal emotion. He looked back at Sulea.

"We're supposed to stay together," he said. "It could prove dangerous, especially to a pair as inexperienced as yourselves. When you agreed to come on this expediton, you agreed to follow the rules. We don't know what happened to the Dawnlight colonists and we can't afford to take foolish risks, like going off alone."

"But why should *you* follow me?"

"I noticed you slipping away. Besides, I didn't notice any of your other friends rushing forward to go with you."

To his surprise, she flushed at the feeble sarcasm.

"You always follow me," she muttered. "Even on the ship."

"I didn't realize it bothered you so," he said. "I'm sorry. But I was curious to get to know you. And on such a small ship, with so few people — well, someone new was a novelty, a relief. I thought you might get the same pleasure talking to me."

"The others didn't think I was such a novelty."

"I suppose you make most of the others uncomfortable."

"It's the same for me," she said. "Dara and I do fine on our own. Trying to know other people is . . . pointless, silly, shallow. After knowing Dara . . ."

"The struggle doesn't seem worth the effort," Brill said. "You can think that, as long as you have Dara. But if you were to find yourself alone again, like other people . . ."

"It's a waste of time talking to you."

Bril watched as she turned away from him. He was tense with the need to talk to her, to spill out the words, long unsaid, that no one else could possibly understand. But Sulea — Sulea might be able to understand, if she would listen to him. But not now. He made himself relax, and followed her inside her mother's house.

Sulea looked around uncertainly — almost reverently, thought Bril, as if she had found herself in a church. Why, if she cared so little about other people, had she come all this way in search of her mother?

Dara had seated herself on a low bench beneath the back window and was blankly staring out, apparently indifferent to her surroundings.

Bril noticed a familiar, and very welcome, piece of furniture: the computer terminal. He went to it and punched up the index, staring into the blank green sea of the screen as he waited for the results.

Most of the listings in the index were, as expected, the usual core library of science, history, literature, music, medicine, and so on. More interesting to him were listings for entries dealing with life in Bright

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Angel's first colony, including the official daily log.

If it did not hold the answer, the log would surely provide some clues. Bril called it up.

No information for that call number.

Bril stared at the words in disbelief, then tried again, using a slightly different command.

The white words flashed on the screen again.

So. Someone had wiped out the log.

That same someone, as Bril quickly discovered, had also eradicated all other entries pertaining to life on Bright Angel. Anything that might have held the slightest clue was gone.

Chewing viciously at his lower lip, Bril turned away from the console and saw Sulea holding something small in her hands and gazing down at it with great attention.

"Find something?" He crossed the floor as he spoke, and intercepted her half-conscious movement to put the object behind her. "Ha-ah," he said, catching hold of it. "We share." He looked down at what he held.

Within the holographic cube a young girl looked pensive, then smiled, then danced in a frilly white petticoat. Had the girl not looked so alive, happy and normal, Bril might have thought it a miniature of Dara.

"You?"

Sulea nodded sullenly.

He held it out to her. "I'm sorry. I was rude. But I just found out that somebody got to the computer before us, wiped out all memory of anything the colonists might have written which could have helped us. And then when you looked as if you were hiding something — well, after all, we're not here to play games, but to find the answer to a mystery."

She stared at the cube in his hand, not reaching out to take it. "May I keep it, or is it important evidence?"

"I *did* say I was sorry."

She took the cube, and looked at him scornfully. "I came here to find my mother. I'm not so stupid that I'll hide anything that might help us find her."

"I don't understand . . ."

She looked at him remotely. "No. Of course you don't."

Tents blossomed in the meadow below Dawnlight.

Bril and Chandra shared one tent; Sulea and Dara, another. Languey Beck, Andia Em Too, and Gavrilo Setsu each had their own tents. So much space and open air were luxuries after the long, enclosed voyage.

The first meal after landing was a group feast, happy and noisy in the middle of all the tents. Only Sulea and Dara did not join in. Just as on the ship, they remained apart, making their separateness from the rest of the party a physical boundary whenever they could. Bril looked at their tent,

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the grey walls all snugly tied down, and wondered what they thought inside. Were they contemptuous of the empty talk and loud laughter from without? Such crude, imperfect methods of communication, he thought. Inside were two who knew each other so intimately that they might not even be able to tell their thoughts apart. But what need to differentiate?

Bril felt lonely, lonelier than he had felt in years.

Chandra slipped her arm around him and pulled him a little away from the table. "What's wrong, sweet?"

He hugged her, as shakily grateful for her presence as if she had pulled him back from a dangerous edge.

"Let's go somewhere we can talk," she said.

Bril glanced around at the others. Andia, the ex-soldier, was getting drunk and singing a bawdy song; Languey Beck was chuckling to himself about something, while young Gavrilo was eating his meal as earnestly as he did everything else.

"Let's go in," he said.

As they walked back to their tent, Chandra said, "I'll be glad when the floaters come in tomorrow, and we can get to work on clearing this up."

"You think it will be that simple — something the floaters will show?"

She looked at him calmly. "I think the floaters may well find our missing colonists for us. Whether or not they'll be in any condition to explain what has happened to them, why the town was abandoned and all communications with the outside cut off — I don't know. But there may be a logical explanation, one we can understand. There very frequently is."

They entered the tent.

"You think they all walked away?"

"Well . . . there are no bodies, no signs of struggle, the erased memory banks . . . I think *somebody* walked away. Whether it was disease, madness, mass murder . . ." She smiled and stretched out luxuriously on the pillowed floor. "It will be fun to find out. I'm glad we're here at last."

Bril stood looking down at her, thinking disjointedly of the years they had spent together, of her strength, her courage, her beauty. She was a long, lean, mahogany-colored woman with short, tightly curling hair.

She cocked her head. "Why so sad?"

"Just thinking. Eight years."

"And it makes you sad!"

He shook his head, smiling a little. "Shall I make us some tea?"

"Please. The green tea?"

Bril busied himself with a pot, tea and water, aware that Chandra was still watching him closely.

She said at last, "I'm happy — can't help but be — that we're here at last. A new world makes me excited; I feel alive."

"It's your life," Bril said. "You're a wanderer."

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"But you, Bril, what about you? Why do you go on wandering? Is it for love of the life — or for love of me?"

"A bit of both," he said. In earlier days, he had found his love for Chandra and love for travel inextricably bound. He had no more thought for wanting to stop exploring than he had to stop loving Chandra. But lately . . .

"Someday," said Chandra, "You'll want to stop traveling and find your home."

Bril poured out two steaming cups of tea.

"Someday, perhaps I will, too," Chandra added, her voice wistful.

"You think so?"

"If I find what I'm looking for . . . isn't that what wanderers are? People who've never found their home?"

Bril smiled. "You think, all this time, you've been looking for the perfect place to settle down?"

"It's possible. After all, Avran Riis gave up traveling after exploring Bright Angel. She joined the first colony."

Bril handed her a cup of tea and settled himself carefully onto the cushions beside her, holding up his fragrantly steaming cup so that it would not spill.

"One of the greatest explorers of our time," Chandra said. "Avran Riis. I never met her. I hope we find her, so I can ask her, face to face, why she chose Bright Angel. Was it to be her permanent home, or was it only a rest? Can a wanderer ever lose her restlessness?" She blew on her tea to cool it, and glanced sideways at Bril.

"It was only for her sake that I let Sulea and her child come along. I set aside all my reservations, my better judgement, agreed to put up with that stone-faced brat of hers — all because my hero, Avran Riis, by some accident of nature, happened to have mothered her!"

"But she might know something, something her mother told her — "

Chandra shook her head, smiling wryly. "She doesn't. It was sentiment, pure sentiment, on my part. There was no other reason." She sighed. "Except that I drank too much at dinner that night, excited by the mission." She sipped her tea, made a face.

Bril stared down at the shining circle of his tea. He thought of Sulea, with her daughter, the two of them in their tent, curled together on the sleeping pad like twins in the womb, like the two halves of one brain. . . .

"Do you know who she reminds me of?" he asked.

"Your sister."

Surprised, Bril looked up quickly and caught — or thought he did — a vague hint of uneasiness in her face.

"How did you know?"

"Bril, really." She smiled, shaking her head reprovingly. "You just mentioned that we'd been together eight years. In that time, I've come to

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know you well. I know about your sister, and how much she meant to you — know as well as I can, since all I know is what you've told me, all these years after the fact.

"Of course the relationship between Sulea and Dara would bring to mind your relationship with your sister. You've told me what it was like when your sister discovered there were others like herself — and left you to be with them — how your whole life was torn apart.

"Of course I know, Bril."

"For years I thought she would come back to me," Bril said. "For years . . . and then all the years spent hopelessly trying to find someone else with whom I could be, well, *with*, as I had been with my sister."

"What do you suppose Sulea will do?" Chandra asked softly. "How will she take it, when her daughter grows up and leaves her?"

Bril sipped the slightly bitter tea. "Perhaps Dara won't. After all, they're mother and daughter. She learned about the world from Sulea even before she was born into it. She might take separation as hard as Sulea would. Sulea, after all, has lived alone — Dara has never existed without Sulea's consciousness enveloping hers."

He paused and sipped his tea again. "But if Dara does leave her, I know what it will be like for Sulea. I know just what it will be like."

It was much later, and Bril had left Chandra sleeping and gone outside the tent when he heard the scream.

He shot one glance at the Guard, which was registering the scream, but no other disturbance. The scream had come from Sulea's tent, and Bril ran there, knowing that the Guard would soon alert the others.

Sulea was sitting up in bed, hugging her sleepy daughter close.

"What happened?"

Sulea's pale face darkened in the moonlight. "Nothing. I had a dream. A nightmare, that's all." Dara stirred sleepily in her mother's grasp, and yawned. She seemed as unconcerned as ever, which Bril found curious. Surely, mother and daughter had shared the same nightmare? If so, why had only one of them found it frightening enough to scream and wake up?

"Does this often happen?"

"No. Just let us go back to sleep. I'm sorry if we — "

"What's going on?" Chandra came into the tent. "Bril?"

"Sulea had a nightmare," Bril said, still watching the figures on the bed. "Nothing to worry about, she says."

"I'll tell the others. Bril?" She touched his arm, and he turned to look at her. "You won't be too long?"

He put his hand on top of hers. "No. I was just taking a walk to tire myself. I'll be in soon."

He watched her leave, and turned back to Sulea. "I could give you a sleeping pill," he said.

"I'll be fine."

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"You seem upset, still," Bril said. "I don't think you'll find it easy to fall asleep. It might help if you talked about it."

Sulea glanced down at Dara, now asleep in her arms.

"The nightmare that Dara didn't share?"

"Oh, but she — " Sulea bit her lip and settled her daughter back on the bed.

"Come for a walk with me," Bril said. "The sky is lovely, the moons are bright . . . talking about it might help."

At last she nodded, still not meeting his eyes, stood up, and pulled on a robe. They left the tent together.

Eerie in the darkness and the silence, a big white bird flew past, close to the ground. Bril felt Sulea move closer to him, and he had to stop himself — remembering the way she had retreated from him and from others in the past — from putting his arm around her.

"What was the nightmare about?" he asked abruptly. "Dara leaving you?"

She drew in a breath sharply. "No, I don't expect you to understand —"

"I understand very well."

"In the dream, Dara and I were standing on a large, flat, yellow plain. It was here, on Bright Angel. We both were dreaming this — we always dream together. We saw some figures in the distance, travelling in our direction, and at the sight we were both filled with excitement, and a strong sense of eager anticipation. Although the creatures were too far away to be seen clearly, we knew what they were. They were centaurs, the creatures my mother found so fascinating about Bright Angel. You've probably read of them, or seen pictures?"

Into his mind came a brief, visual memory of a herd of large, four-footed animals which looked more like dinosaurs than any sort of horses. He also vaguely remembered some uncharacteristically awed-sounding description from the early reports made by Avran Riis.

"I've seen stills," he said. "I don't understand why she called them centaurs."

"From Greek mythology," she said blankly.

Bril smiled. "I know the word. But I didn't see much resemblance to the half-horse, half-men of legend in *those* creatures."

"It was their faces," Sulea said, her voice suddenly sounding drained. "If you had seen their faces . . ."

"As you did, in the dream," Bril prompted when her voice trailed off.

"Yes. They came pounding up to us, their broad, flat feet crushing the vegetation, their hot breath boiling the air around us, their scent making our heads reel — and they looked at us.

"Their faces — were like the faces of stone gods. Calm, beautiful, terrifying. The more terrifying because they grew out of those crushingly

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huge, elephantine bodies. The brute strength, the unnatural, cool wisdom in their eyes — I was afraid, so very afraid. I knew they could destroy us.

"But Dara — in our dream, Dara walked toward them, her arms outstretched. And she was smiling. She welcomed them. She was happier than she had ever been in her life.

"I screamed, I tried to warn her, to tell her they would hurt her, but she didn't understand. For the first time in our lives together, she didn't understand. She thought they were to be loved, not feared.

"It was as if she could not hear me. I screamed, I couldn't hold her back, I screamed . . .

"And I woke up."

They had walked too far from camp. Bril could see the Guard flashing a fretful, warning light. He caught Sulea's arm to turn her back. She did not pull away, so he left his hand resting lightly on her arm, as they began to walk back together.

"Dara did not share this dream?"

"What? No, of course she did. I told you, we always dream together. Our minds are together. For us to have separate dreams would be like one mind carrying on with two dreams at the same time!"

"But Dara wasn't frightened," Bril said, "When I found the two of you —"

"Dara wasn't frightened," Sulea agreed. "That's what frightens *me* so. It wasn't the dream itself, but the fact that for the first time Dara and I were not thinking and feeling as one. For the first time — oh, you can't know what that's like!"

Bril grimaced, and gripped her arm more tightly.

"It was the same dream — it should have been the same for both of us, but to Dara, the centaurs were something wonderful, something that evoked love and awe, rather than terror. And I couldn't make Dara understand how I felt, how *she* should have felt."

"So it wasn't the centaurs that frightened you, but the idea that you and Dara might think and feel differently. *That* was your nightmare — your fear that Dara is growing away from you. The centaurs were just a pretext. Anything might have happened in the dream to communicate the same message: that Dara is growing up, and you can't expect your closeness to last forever."

"No!" She pulled away from him in anger, then relaxed. "I'm sorry, Bril, but you don't know what you're talking about. Dara and I aren't just an ordinary mother and daughter, we're so close we might as well be one person."

"That's where you're wrong," Bril said. "You are two people, and to think that you're one will only make things harder, prolong the agony for you, when the time for separation comes."

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"Why are you saying this? I know my daughter — you don't. I know my daughter as well as I know myself, because . . ."

"Look," Bril said. "I'm not 'pathic myself, any more than you are on your own. But I had a sister once, and for many years we were linked as closely as you and your daughter are. Until she started growing up a little, until she started reaching out restlessly, and learned that there were others like herself who had a lot more to offer her than her pathetic, clinging leech of a brother.

"And so she left me. As I think — as I *know* your daughter will someday leave you. And you know it, too, or you wouldn't have nightmares about it."

"I'm sorry for you," Sulea said, her voice cool and distant again. "I'm sorry you lost your sister, but Dara and I are different: Dara could no more exist without me than I could return to an existence without her. Good night."

Bril watched her walk away from him in the bright moonlight. It took a great effort to turn and walk towards his own tent: suddenly he felt almost too tired to move another step.

He thought of Sulea getting into bed beside her sleeping daughter; thought of Sulea hugging her, perhaps crying over her, with a depth of emotion Dara would never be able to understand. In time, Dara would leave Sulea behind, bodily and mentally, as she had once left her womb for a wider world.

All of Sulea's love would be useless. It would end in pain and isolation. It would tear her apart.

It was as useless as his own love.

He entered the tent and wearily undressed himself. Sulea, he thought, feeling hopeless. Sulea.

He lay down beside Chandra, who stirred in her sleep and then sighed when he kissed her lightly. Sulea, Sulea.

Useless.

Damn you, Dara. And damn you, too, long-dead sister of mine.

Sulea, can't you feel my love? Can't you hear my thoughts?

Rising slowly out of sleep, Bril was dimly aware that Chandra's warmth had left the bed, and that there were voices outside the tent.

"Bril, wake up! A herd of centaurs, heading this way!"

He sat up at once and reached for his clothes. "What? Where?"

"Gavrilo spotted them. They're still pretty far away, but they're moving in our direction at a good rate of speed. Shouldn't take them very long to reach us. Of course, we don't actually know if they know we're here — they could be coming in this direction for some other reason. But I think, considering that Avran Riis mentioned that they seemed to show up in order to examine her group — "

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"Showing no signs of fear, and very little curiosity in our presence," Bril said, quoting the first report on Bright Angel.

"Do you suppose it could be the same herd?"

Bril shrugged. "I wouldn't want to guess. I'm anxious to see them — I'm curious to see why they impressed Avran Riis so."

They went outside together. The air was close and musty-smelling, and the light had a lowering, yellowish cast.

"Dust," said Chandra. "That wind that swept through here just before dawn was heavy with it." She sneezed twice, abruptly, and rubbed her nose, making a wry face.

Bril looked toward the rising sun, a halo of bronze light in the eastern sky. "Where are they?"

"There, to the north. That dark brown blur against the sky." It was young Gavrilo Setsu, humbly offering his discovery. This was his second expedition: he could scarcely sleep at night for his determination not to miss a thing.

Bril squinted and stared into the northern sky. He could barely make out a moving, brownish line.

"We could see them clearly with the glasses," Chandra said.

"Yes," Bril agreed. He noticed that the tents had all emptied now, everyone out to see the distant centaurs — even Sulea and Dara. No one moved to go back for glasses.

The creatures were traveling fast. Soon it was possible to distinguish individual, elephantine bodies, to see the round, incongruously small heads bobbing slightly at the end of long, slender necks held precariously erect. They moved in an oddly graceful canter, without apparent strain despite their bulk.

In a moment, thought Bril, we shall see their faces. He was gripped by anticipation so intense it was close to terror. Soon, he would be in their presence. He both feared and desired that.

It passed through them all like a wave: without a word spoken, the waiting people began to walk slowly away from the encampment, out onto the open plain, to meet the arrival of the centaurs.

They were suddenly surrounded by the wall of grey flesh, and the overwhelming scent of them: rich and strange and powerful.

Bril thought the pounding of his heart would surely kill him; for a moment, he was blinded by his tears:

Oh, who are you? *What* are you?

Huge, grey bodies supported by four powerful legs and a huge, curving tail. The arch of a long, sinuous neck. Skin hairless, rough and pebbled in texture. Feet large and padded. Animals. But that was not all.

Their heads, their faces . . .

Oh, what *are* you?

The faces of gods. Human, yet inhuman. Their round heads should

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have seemed ridiculous as the termination of those immense, powerful bodies and long necks. But they did not.

Bril stared helplessly, caught by the large, strangely glowing eyes.

Not human, those powerful jaws filled with the square teeth of a ruminant. Not human the long, flat nose. And the grey-green eyes with the silver light, shining with an awesome look of wisdom: not human, either, but more than human.

The centaurs had round, flat ears and thin-lipped mouths. Those mouths were curved into a strange half-smile as they stood and quietly observed the humans. It was a disturbing expression — the sight of the smile stirred some deep, buried memory, some long-forgotten dream in Bril's mind.

"What are you?" He spoke aloud at last, voicing the question that tore at him. His voice quavered, and he wanted to hide his face, yet he could not stop looking.

The centaurs made no sound. They did not move. They smiled that awesome smile and gazed at the humans with their strange eyes.

Bril felt enveloped by a thick, enshrouding mystery: frightened and half-drugged by it. He wanted to clear it away, to name these creatures, name this feeling they woke in him, give a word to what they meant. If he could say the word, speak the name, the mists would part and doors open; everything would change. It only awaited his speaking.

He panted through his mouth, trying not to smell them, hoping to clear his head somehow. He shut his eyes, but those glowing, terrifying eyes were still there, behind his lids.

Bril cried out, opening his eyes, and stared around wildly. The centaurs were moving away. Slowly, lifting and lowering their huge legs deliberately, their heads lifted high again, the herd of centaurs was leaving.

The spell partially broken, at last able to notice the others, Bril saw Sulea hugging Dara. Dara was oblivious to her mother, staring after the departing centaurs, her body straining and her eyes alive as they had never been before. Sulea held her tightly, but Dara might have been made of mist.

Bril ran to them, his body bent and twisting with sudden pain. He threw his arms around Sulea, who still embraced Dara, and cried out in his grief: "Tell me, tell me who they are!"

He was weeping uncontrollably, and Sulea shook like a grass in the wind within his arms. Only Dara, at the center of the embrace, was calm, and her calm had a new quality now. She glowed, as if a fire had just been lit in the cold, dark room of her soul.

They were all like invalids: miraculous survivors of some long illness, still shaky from the fever, bewildered and a bit ashamed of the wild

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dreams the fever had brought.

Even Sulea and Dara stayed with the company for the breakfast they all, with no appetite, made pretense of eating. They sat around the table in the center of camp and tried to explain to themselves what had happened.

"It was the faces," said Languey Beck, a seasoned explorer. "Those almost-human heads on such bodies — it shocks our expectations, as people were once shocked by wild apes. No matter how rational we are, it's a shock to see what we think of as human set atop what we think of as animal.

"I remember — not from personal experience mind you, as I was just a child at the time — when contact was first made with the Brr-Angrians. People had a hard time, a very hard time, coming to grips with the understanding that these creatures were a lot closer to us mentally than to the bugs they resembled."

"Culture shock," Chandra interrupted. "I see what you're saying, but, Lang, we have no proof that these creatures are intelligent. And even if they are a little strange looking — why should we be so much more shaken by these creatures than we were by meeting up with the Arrakk ghost-cows? You were on that expedition with me; you remember what *they* were like!"

Chandra and Languey exchanged reminiscent smiles, and Languey began, "I'm also reminded of the time . . ."

"The centaurs *are* intelligent," said Gavrilo. He leaned across the table, trying for Chandra's attention, earnest and intent. "They must be. We recognized something within them that is greater than ourselves: something more than mere intelligence — something awesome. That's what we felt; it's that simple."

"Not as simple as you, Gavrilo Setsu," said Andia with a sneer. She laughed abruptly, and Bril tensed, fearing a fight. "You'll be talking about our immortal souls next, you little . . ."

"Andia," Chandra said sharply. "We're not in the service here." She turned her attention to Gavrilo. "All you're saying, Gavrilo, is an expression of what we all felt. We know how we all reacted to the centaurs. We want to find out *why*."

"There is no other reason than that we recognized them for what they are, and reacted," Gavrilo said. "Why shouldn't it be that simple?"

"I'm reminded of the hell-kites of the Lydian army," Andia said. "Very small, flying creatures which release a vapor which induces the sensations of fear in any warm-blooded creature it falls on.

"Since we all felt . . . fear . . . and awe . . . perhaps this indicates that the centaurs were secreting something, some defensive chemical weapon to protect them from any who might mean them harm."

"A nice theory," Chandra said. "I'm familiar with the hell-kites. But, Andia, why would a creature like the centaur — living in a world without

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enemies — have evolved such a weapon?"

"Perhaps it has some other intentions," Andia said. "A sexual hormone, perhaps? But our alien bodies react to it in a different way. Or perhaps there were once predators here, now extinct."

"I don't like that," Gavrilo said. "And I don't believe it. I know what I felt."

She looked at him contemptuously. "No, of course you don't like it. You wouldn't like the Lydian hell-kites, either, but they exist, whether or not you believe in them. You like to believe in gods and strange forces and the soul; you like to think your soul is responsible for whatever you feel; you can't bear the idea that complicated chemical reactions could be responsible for your feelings, no matter how you want to intellectualize it."

"Andia, please," Chandra said wearily. "Your idea does have merit. If it is a chemical reaction, perhaps we can protect ourselves against it by covering all our bare skin and breathing bottled air when they come near."

"Why must we worry about protecting ourselves?" Gavrilo demanded. "We reacted to them as if they had been gods — perhaps they are. And if they are gods, then how can we protect ourselves from them, and why should we try?"

Something made Bril look at Dara just then, and he felt a prickling sensation down his back. She was smiling. And the smile on her face — before always so bland and blank — was the eerie, knowing, half-smile of the centaurs: that same, archaic smile sometimes found on the carved or sculpted heads of long-forgotten gods on Earth.

The floater reports came in a few hours later, and everyone gathered in Chandra's tent, eager to learn whatever might be revealed when she ran a quick computer analysis on the mass of information.

They gazed at a film which showed a herd of centaurs traveling slowly, pausing often in groves of trees to graze or simply to stand about. Bril waited uneasily for some recurrence of the sensations the presence of the centaurs had roused, but they did not come. It apparently was not something transmitted by a camera.

Chandra caught her breath, and there was a rustling as everyone craned closer to the screen. There, following the centaurs at a little distance, was another herd.

And this herd was *human*.

The Dawnlight survivors: thin, dirty, and with a wild look about them. There were, perhaps, twenty of them. Twenty, out of four hundred and fifty.

What had happened to them? Bril wondered, feeling a profound unease as he watched the small, shambling group trailing in the wake of

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the indifferent centaurs. What had brought them to this? He wished the floaters had brought back, instead of this, films of hundreds of bloated, purple corpses, swarming with some easily isolated alien bacteria.

Then, there would be an easy answer. But what was the answer to this?

Chandra broke the dismayed, almost fearful silence as they all gazed into the screen.

"We know where they are now — at least, where some of them are. We'll go to them, just as soon as we get the hovercar assembled, and we'll ask them for the answer to our mystery."

Bril turned, wanting to disagree with Chandra's too-easy assumption that the answer was at hand, when he caught sight of Sulea and remained silent, not knowing what to say. Sulea had grown very pale, and she looked miserable and afraid. Dara was nowhere in sight, but in his mind's eye Bril once again saw her smiling the centaurs' smile.

They had been traveling for several hours when Andia called out in her clear, neutral voice, "Party of survivors sighted, one and one-half kilometers beyond the herd of centaurs, ahead and to the left."

Bril pressed against a window to see, close between Gavrilo and Chandra. Neither humans nor centaurs gave any sign of noticing the vehicle approaching them so swiftly. What was wrong with them, Bril wondered? What made them leave Dawnlight and a plentiful supply of food to wander through a strange world until the clothes fell off their starving bodies in filthy rags?

The car settled to a stop and Andia cut off the engine. Chandra reached across to squeeze Bril's hand quickly, and then the door was sliding open.

"Stay together and be on guard," Chandra cautioned. "There's the chance they may turn on us."

Perhaps half a kilometer away from the car, clearly visible on the flat, open plain, were the humans, still slowly straggling after the centaurs. The members of the expedition now began to follow, in turn, after the Dawnlight survivors.

But those bedraggled beings did not seem aware that they were being followed. When Chandra called out to them, again and again, not one of them turned, not one of them faltered or paused to listen. Walking as briskly as they were, it did not take Chandra's group long to catch up with the people they were following.

Chandra caught hold of one of the shamblers by the arm, stopping him. Bril felt his heart lurch unpleasantly as Chandra pulled the young man around so they all could see his face.

The youth was filthy and emaciated as they all were, and could have been aged anywhere from about 14 to 20.

"Hello," said Chandra urgently. "Can you speak? Do you hear me?"

He stared at her — seemingly through her — with dull, vacant eyes. He

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swayed slightly, and only Chandra's firm hold kept him from continuing to walk after the others. Chandra waved her free hand in front of his eyes, snapped her fingers. He didn't blink.

"Is he blind and deaf?" Chandra asked. "Bril, what's wrong with him?"

"The same thing that's wrong with them all," Bril said helplessly.

"Zombies," said Andia, looking around in disgust.

They did seem to be animated corpses, thought Bril. What drove them? What kept them going?

"Can you speak?" Chandra persisted. When he still did not respond she let go of him, and he shambled off after the rest of his company. Chandra now caught hold of a woman and peered into her face.

"Do you know her?" asked Bril uneasily.

"No, No. Sulea, come here. Is this your mother?"

Bril stared at the woman Chandra had detained. She, too, was emaciated, and her facial features were sunk in dirt and wrinkles. Her body sagged, without will, in Chandra's hands.

Sulea looked uneasily at the woman, unwilling to move closer. "No . . . no, it can't be."

"She would hardly be recognizable to anyone in that conditon," Bril said. "Half-starved, filthy, entranced . . ."

"Avran," said Chandra. "Avran Riis. Avran. Do you hear me? I don't want you to be Avran Riis — I wouldn't wish such a fate as this on my hero — but if you are, answer me. If you are not, then tell me. Do you hear me?" She shook the woman, who flopped in her grasp like a huge, stuffed doll.

"Bril, can't you examine her? Tell us what's wrong with her, with all of them?"

Chandra was looking to him for help; all of them expected him to find the answer. It should have been a challenge, it was the sort of thing that once would have invigorated him. But not now, in the midst of all these zombies, with the heavy odor of the centaurs carried on the wind. His stomach was churning, his heart pounding: we're being infected. We'll sicken and become as they are. We must get away before it is too late for all of us.

"I . . . can't possibly . . . without some tests, at least," Bril said uncertainly.

"Well, test her," Andia said, tapping the arm of the woman Chandra still held. "They're not putting up any protest — why shouldn't we take her back to the ship for testing?"

"You can do some preliminary tests in the hovercar, can't you, Bril? We don't need to go to all the way back to the ship just yet," said Chandra.

"Yes," Bril said dully. He wanted to object, to refuse. He didn't want to be near this creature, near any of them. He would become infected;

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they all would.

"Bril?"

He was, he realized, being irrational. Certainly it was a risk, but it was the sort of risk that had to be taken. They couldn't run away.

"Sure," he said. "Let's go."

Chandra and Bril took the woman back to the hovercar, leaving the others to follow the Dawnlight survivors.

Bril ran a series of tests on the unresponsive woman while Chandra sat at the computer terminal and tried to work out just which of the colonists this one was.

"She's suffering from malnutrition," Bril said at length. "Obviously. And she's developed scurvy and a thriving colony of body lice. Her EEG shows that she's in a trance state — she's neither blind nor deaf, she's just selectively tuning us out. I can't tell if the trance is self-induced or caused by something else. There's nothing that I can point to and say there, that little bug is the culprit responsible. Kill it, and she'll be back to normal in no time. I just don't know *why* she's not eating properly, why she's wandering around in a daze, unable to take care of herself."

Chandra nodded thoughtfully and turned back to the computer. "You know, I think she may be . . ."

Bril lost track of what she was saying. He stared at the woman slumped on the padded seat before him, fighting the deep disgust the sight of her aroused in him. Her feet still twitched, as if she were trying to walk but could not find the ground, and every once in a while she would lurch forward and try to stand up. Each time Bril had caught her and pushed her gently back.

Just then she lurched forward again. He caught her, and, as his fingers closed on her shoulders, he had a sudden urge to catch hold of her throat, instead. To catch hold of that mass of wrinkled flesh and squeeze — he knew she wouldn't struggle — squeeze until he squeezed the life out of her. An end to her contamination, to this life that was no longer living, to this abomination. He had strong hands, and she was weak and oblivious to him. It would not be difficult.

"Bril!"

The old woman flopped back on the seat. Her breathing was harsh and labored. Bril broke out into a heavy sweat. He had very nearly killed a fellow human.

"Bril."

"I . . ." He looked down at his hands and shuddered. "I don't know what happened — all I could think of was the need to destroy her . . . to destroy her before she destroys *us*."

"We have to fight it." Chandra moved beside him and put an arm across his shoulders. "I feel it, too. I understand. But we can't let it get the best of us."

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"It's a hard thing to fight — a sensation, not something logical. . . . "

"I know, Bril, but there's no rational reason for this feeling. She's an old woman, dying; she poses no threat — "

"She very well *may* pose a threat," Bril said. "A serious one. If she is diseased, if she carries the germs of whatever wiped out Dawnlight and made the survivors like *this*, then she may have already contaminated us. We may not have much time before we're like her."

"I've thought of that," Chandra said quietly. "Thought of wiping them all out and leaving this place just as fast as we can. But that's not a rational response, Bril. You found no organism you could identify as causing this . . . disease. Have you thought that perhaps what destroyed Dawnlight was not a physical organism, but simply what we are feeling?

"These survivors feel, perhaps, an exaggerated version of the awe the presence of the centaurs made us feel. Perhaps they gave in to it, and that's why they trail after the centaurs. While those who did *not* give in to it may have felt just what you have described as feeling towards this old woman. They may have been possessed by disgust, fear and a murderous hatred. Perhaps they killed each other off."

"But *why*?"

Chandra shrugged helplessly. "I don't know — but I know what I felt, what we all felt, and *that's* real enough, no matter how irrational it may have been."

The old woman lurched forward, onto her feet, again. This time they made no move to stop her, but watched in silence as she made her stumbling way out of the hovercar.

"Back to following the centaurs," Bril said. "We've got to get out of here, Chandra, before it starts happening to us. We don't belong here. We've got to leave right away, Chandra."

"Bril, we've got a job to do. We can't give in to our fears and feelings."

"What job? We've seen what happened to the Dawnlight colonists, and I think we realize that there's a strong chance the same thing will happen to us if we don't get out of here fast. The longer we stay, the greater the possibility that we'll end our lives as shambling, mindless creatures, unable to care for ourselves."

Chandra bit her lip. "Soon, Bril, but not right away. We have to find out, as best we can, what happened to all of the Dawnlight colonists, not just this little remnant. We came here to find an answer, and we're not leaving with part of one. Just — be strong. We've been in dangerous spots before."

"You know this is different, Chandra, and if we stay too long — "

"I know, Bril."

"But we don't even know how long 'too long' is. That's the danger," said Bril.

* * *

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The Dawnlight survivors, followed by their would-be rescuers, finally caught up with the centaurs in a grove of fruit-trees. The day's journey ended, the centaurs feasted on round, green leaves and slightly underripe fruits. Their human followers also pulled the fruit from the trees, and scratched wearily in the ground for edible roots.

Watching this from a short distance away, Bril felt torn apart by his emotions. Conflicting with his fear and disgust as he watched the zombie-like humans was a great longing, a worshipful awe for the centaurs. It took a great effort of will to keep distance between himself and the centaurs, for he wanted to be close to them, to see those noble faces close, to feel the heat of their bodies against his own skin.

Bril trembled and closed his eyes, afraid that the sight of the centaurs would draw him, against his will, out of himself. To fight this feeling, he concentrated on the fear, and on the disgust and hatred he felt for the wretched humans who had surrendered their will and gone to live among the indifferent centaurs.

"We may as well turn in for the night," said Chandra. Her voice was very queer.

Bril opened his eyes to look at her, and saw, with a shock, that there were tears in her eyes and running down her face. He turned his back on the grove and put his arm around Chandra. The small group walked back towards the hovercar, moving slowly, as someone deeply tired or deathly ill might turn towards the waiting bed.

They were all subdued that night as they ate their small supper and made ready for bed in the hovercar. Bril knew, without need for telepathic contact, that they all shared the same feelings. It was something they were all struggling with, together, yet alone; and no one wanted to talk about it.

When they turned in, Bril lay awake for a long time in the dark. Although the self-contained environment of the hover-car closed out all sight, scent, and sound of the centaurs, he was very much aware of their presence, less then a kilometer away. He wondered if they ever slept. Did they close their lustrous eyes, or stand keeping watch all night? Did they kneel, sit or stand in the darkness outside? The longing to see and know for himself was nearly unbearable.

If we don't leave, he thought as he finally drifted to sleep, it will be too late. Too late for us all.

They woke to a woman's wailing.

"She's gone! Oh, she's gone! Gone!"

Chandra was the first to reach Sulea, and she caught hold of her, embracing her without love but efficiently, as someone will perform life-saving measures for a stranger. "Calm yourself. Calm. Shh. Shh. You're dreaming."

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"No," said Bril. A quick look around the hover car with its few sleepy inhabitants was enough to tell him what he feared. "She's not dreaming. Dara *is* gone. And Gavrilo, too."

Chandra stopped holding Sulea and glanced around automatically. "Oh, no," she said softly. Then, in a commanding tone, "Up, everybody. Get dressed." She looked with annoyance at Sulea, who was still wailing. "And shut *her* up."

Bril stepped forward and took Sulea into his arms. "All right," he murmured. "It will be all right."

Sulea subsided into nearly inaudible sobs now, as Bril said whatever nonsense came into his head that he thought might comfort her. She raised her head from his breast after a few moments of this and looked at him through tear-filled eyes. "She's gone," she said, in a tone of utter hopelessness.

And it was only then that Bril understood. The parting Sulea had dreamed about and he had predicted had happened. Dara had not merely left the hovercar and all the people in it, she had also withdrawn from her mother's mind.

Chandra glanced at Bril, still naked, and holding Sulea.

"Get dressed," she snapped. "And arm yourself. We'll need every able-bodied — you can leave her here. I don't imagine she'll be much use to us."

Bril gently disengaged himself from Sulea.

"Please — don't leave me . . ." she reached out, and Bril caught her hand.

"All right," he said. "You can stay with me. Get yourself dressed."

"Remember," said Chandra when the five of them stepped outside into the cool, early-morning air. "The most powerful weapon they have against us is our own feelings. No one came into the hovercar and took Gavrilo and Dara by force — they went of their own accord.

"I think we all know what they felt, because we have felt it ourselves. We must constantly be on guard, we must not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed. Concentrate on something else. Concentrate on . . ." she paused, groping.

"Hate," suggested Andia. The possibility of battle made her glow. "Concentrate on hating them, and there won't be room for fear or anything else."

Chandra looked uneasily. "That could be dangerous, too," she said. "I think we should try to stay rational. We want to get Gavrilo and Dara and get out. We don't want to turn into a crowd of slaughtering berserkers — which I think hating them too much could do."

"We don't kill them unless they try to kill us," Andia said. She twitched her shoulders. "Understood. But I still think it couldn't hurt to concentrate on hating them."

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"We'll do whatever we have to do," Chandra said. She gave them a nod, and they set off.

Chandra and Andia took the lead; Bril and Sulea followed a few paces behind; and Languey Beck hung back. Bril glanced over his shoulder at him once, wondering what the man was thinking. Was he afraid that the sight of the centaurs — or, if Andia was right, their scent — would knock down all his careful defenses and turn him into a zombie?

Bril squeezed Sulea's hand, wishing he could give her strength for what she was going through. But he wasn't at all sure he had enough strength even for himself.

It was not difficult, once they had reached the grove of trees, to pick out the figures of Gavrilo and Dara from the rest of the humans: the freshness and wholeness of their clothes gave them away at once.

But despite those external differences, Gavrilo and Dara were obviously a part of the small group of humans scattered around the grove, reclining on the ground or slumped against the bole of a tree. Even from a distance it was possible to see the changes in posture and attitude that allied their former companions with the followers of the centaurs.

As for the centaurs, they stood as still and silent as statues among the trees. As to whether their eyes were open or closed, Bril could not tell; he dared not let himself look too closely at them.

"Wait for my order," said Chandra to Andia.

Bril felt weak, and touched his gun. As a physician, he had always hated the idea of killing, but at that moment the gun was a comfort, anchoring him to reality and protecting him from the deadly lure of the centaurs.

"Gavrilo!" Chandra called out. Then, again, "Gavrilo Setsu! Do you hear me?"

The human figures began to stir slightly. The centaurs remained motionless.

"Gavrilo!"

Bril found himself shouting with her, "Gavrilo!"

And then all of them were crying out, like a flock of birds: "Gavrilo! Gavrilo! Gavrilo!"

"Dara!" Sulea ran forward towards the grove of trees, her arms outstretched, calling to her daughter. "Dara!"

"Stop her!"

Then they were all running. Bril quickly caught hold of Sulea, but the time for waiting was past. They all continued to run into the grove of trees, ready to face the danger head-on, ready to drag Gavrilo out forcibly since he had no will of his own to come to them.

Gavrilo was lying on the ground, his head propped up on a projecting root. His eyes were open, but they had the blank, blind gaze of the sleepwalker. Bril felt sick at the sight of his slack, uncaring face.

Sulea tugged her arm from Bril's grasp, and this time he made no move

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to stop her. He watched as Chandra bent slightly and grasped Gavrilo by one arm.

"Gavrilo," she said. "Get up. It's time to go. You've got to come back to the ship with us."

When he did not respond, she began tugging at him, trying to lift him to his feet. But, although as entranced as the others, Gavrilo was much stronger. He did not react: he simply did not allow Chandra to raise him.

"Help me with him," Chandra panted.

Bril caught hold of Gavrilo's other arm. Through his sickness, he managed a mock-hearty tone. "Come on, Gavrilo, old buddy. On your feet."

Between them, Chandra and Bril managed to pull Gavrilo upright.

"Now, walk, Gavrilo," Bril urged. "Walk. Move your feet. You don't want us to have to carry you all the way. do you?"

Gavrilo hung between them, a dead weight. Bril sighed, and glanced at Chandra. Together they began to hoist him off the ground, to better carry him, when, abruptly, Gavrilo came to life.

They left him tense, but before they could think of reacting, his fists were flailing and his feet kicking viciously. They were both knocked to the ground. For a moment, Bril could not move or breath. Then he grabbed for his gun, certain Gavrilo would come at him while he was still sprawled helplessly on the ground.

Had he been a soldier, Bril might have fired immediately, as soon as he had Gavrilo in his sights. But Bril was not a soldier. He hesitated.

And then he lowered the gun.

Gavrilo stood, arms and legs spread, directly before Bril. An easy shot. He seemed to be inviting it, eager for death. And his eyes were almost alive again.

Chandra got up. "Gavrilo — "

Bril holstered the gun and rose to help her take hold of him again, but the other man turned and walked away from them, towards one of the silent, standing centaurs.

As they watched, he carefully lay down on the ground with his head close to a powerful hind leg. A twitch could stun him; an unconscious backward stop would smash his head or pulp his shoulder. "We'll tie him this time," Chandra said, reaching into her belt pouch for some cord. She winced, and moved a shoulder painfully.

"I didn't expect him to snap out of it like that," she said. "But now we know that they *may* fight back."

"Something's going to happen," Languey Beck said — and with some surprise, Bril realized the man had been standing close beside him for some time.

Chandra looked around, frowning. Bril felt the uneasiness.

"They seem more alert," she said. "Fine time they picked for waking

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up, I must say. Well, be on your guard, all of you. We may have a little struggle on our hands, after all."

There was a scream, and the sound of a gun firing, and then the unmistakable stench of burned flesh.

They found Andia waving her gun around menacingly. One arm was bleeding badly. Before her, on the ground, was a decapitated body.

"He came at me," Andia said to Chandra." Jumped me — with a knife! I thought these zombies were harmless, but look out!"

Chandra and Bril looked around. None of the centaur-followers were moving, but they were all crouched or standing now — even Gavrilo was sitting up — and despite their zombie-like expressions there was now a feeling of tension and watchfulness in the air.

Bril said, "Let me fix that arm."

"It can wait."

"Not if you intend to be of any more use to us today, it can't. The knife?"

She gestured at the ground where a short, sharp knife-blade lay glinting through a covering of blood.

"What were you doing?" Bril asked as he cleaned the wound and applied the anaesthetic.

"Well, since Sulea didn't seem to be making any headway with her brat, I thought I'd just pick her up and haul her back to the ship. I'd just picked her up when that one," she gestured at the ground, "came at me and shoved a knife into my arm."

Bril stitched the edges of the wound neatly together.

"So I dropped the brat and blasted the creature with the knife."

Finished with the stitching, Bril noticed that Dara was sitting on the ground a few meters away. She did not, to Bril, look any different than she had in the days when her mind was linked with her mother's. He wondered if now she were in contact with the centaurs, and a painful stab of longing struck him.

"Hey." Andia tweaked his ear painfully. "Let's go see what the boss wants done next. Thanks for fixing my arm."

Sulea was standing in earnest conversation with Chandra and Languey when Bril and Andia approached. Chandra turned to them. "Sulea has had some communication with her daughter."

Sulea looked at Bril. "I can't share what she feels, or understand it, but for just a moment I felt it — she let me feel it.

"They're not sick, but they've found God. All they ask in life is to be close to the centaurs, to worship them. If we try to take them away — any of them — they'll all fight us. They don't mind dying.

"We have the choice of leaving now, or staying and joining them."

"I say we fight them," Andia said. "Get Gavrilo away from here and he'll come back to normal. They may outnumber us, but we're stronger,

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with better weapons. If they all want to die, let them."

"And if some of us should die?" Chandra asked. She shook her head. "Dara also told Sulea what happened to the rest of the colonists. It was a holy war, between those who felt the longing to be the followers of the centaurs, and those who felt threatened. Those who were fighting for their God found it easier to be bloodthirsty. Some of the others thought it a sickness — until their patients began killing them to return to the life they had chosen."

Chandra glanced at Sulea, who nodded affirmation of what she had said.

"So you see," said Chandra. "As Andia has said, they are many but we are strong. Perhaps we could kill them all and recapture Gavrilo and Dara without killing *them*. But should we? We didn't come here to kill off the survivors of the Dawnlight colony, after all, and we have no authority to command Gavrilo and Dara to come with us if they don't wish."

"It's not a matter of their wishes," Andia exclaimed.

"They have no will now — they're sick. They can only recover if we take them away from this place."

Chandra looked at Bril. "Are they sick? Bril, you're our doctor: that is your decision to make. You must decide if this is a sickness we're dealing with, or a religion."

Unhappily, and expecting to be attacked for his trouble, Bril walked towards Gavrilo. To do so meant walking towards a centaur, and the nearness of the creature made Bril tremble and clench his teeth. They are animals, he told himself. Only animals. What I feel is not awe or worship or fear, but merely a physiological reaction. I cannot control that, but I can control my thoughts.

Bril knelt beside Gavrilo, who gazed at him with empty eyes. Bril wondered what Gavrilo saw with those eyes. Above them, the sleeping centaur twitched, and a shudder passed through Gavrilo and into Bril.

"Gavrilo," said Bril, desperately, and then could not go on. He didn't know what to say, what to do. Was Gavrilo possessed by sickness, madness, or the truth?

Gavrilo's blank expression now altered, and he began to smile. That placid, knowing, archaic smile. The smile of ancient peace knowledge. The centaur's smile.

Bril was blinded by tears. More than anything, he wanted to rise and fling his arms about the centaur standing above them, cling to it and stay there forever. He wanted to know the god that Gavrilo knew.

Instead, Bril rose, and turned, and walked back to the people who waited for him.

"That man is not sick," Bril said to them all. "*We* are the ones who need to be cured."

That first night back in the safe, dead emptiness of space, Bril and

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Sulea found what comfort they could together in the familiar motions and rhythms of sex.

Bril lay awake long after Sulea fell asleep. He felt all his emotions had been cauterized, that within he was one clean wound, ready now for the healing scars to grow. On some familiar, settled world, he and Sulea would build new lives for themselves.

Then he thought of Chandra and, with a guilty start, realized that she must be alone now, brooding alone on the events of the day. He got up and went to find her.

Her posture communicated a feeling of hopelessness he had never seen in her. She did not turn when he entered, but said his name. She continued to stare out at the utter blackness that enveloped them.

At last she spoke.

"What lies do I tell myself now?

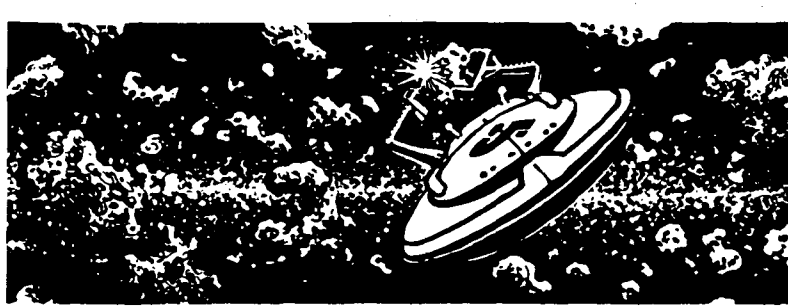
"All my life I have been searching, but when I finally found what I had been searching for, I was too frightened to acept it — I turned away in terror.

"Do I go on telling myself lies about chemical reaction, hormonal secretions? They are gods — must be whatever we mean by that ancient word. What power they have, to evoke such love, such fear! What power, to give such peace.

"I've seen them; I've seen what should come at the end of life, and yet I go on living.

"How? How do I go on living? How do I go on now?"

Lisa Tuttle is a Texan, now transplanted to England, where she lives with her husband, fellow SF-writer Christopher Priest. Her distinguished short stories have been appearing for about a decade now, in most of the major science fiction magazines and anthologies. With George R.R. Martin, she wrote the popular Windhaven, *part of which appeared in our March 1981 issue as "The Fall." She won the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer in 1974.*



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THE OBSERVATORY

by George H. Scithers

This is about you.

In the middle of December, 1983, we mailed out a short questionnaire to about 10% of our subscribers. Somewhat over half of you who received these answered our questions and sent them back. We think you might be interested in what you — collectively — have told us about yourselves.

About 60% of you subscribe to *Analog Science Fiction*; about 60% to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*; about 50% to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*; about 15% to *Omni*. Alas: the reverse is not true; we'd be delighted if 15% of the *Omni* subscribers also subscribed to *Amazing®*, but we haven't reached that point. Yet.

As to preferences in material: you seem to be undecided about science-fact articles, horror, and serials. You seem to feel we have about the right balance of fantasy (too much: 29%, enough: 49%, too little: 22%), and to dislike excerpts of novels.

The ratio of males to females is about 75% to 25%, which is generally true of the other science-fiction magazines as well. Since the same ratio appears when we sample the first names of subscribers (excluding initials and names that are not gender-specific), we know that men and women are equally willing to respond to this survey.

You buy books, lots of books: around six paperbacks and one hardcover a month. An astonishing 34% own home computers (one respondent owns six, but then, she's a programmer), while 22% expect to buy one within six months.

Your response to our question about your age surprised us. About 16% of you are over 65 and have been reading the magazine since the Beginning, back in April of 1926. The **mean** age of all of you (that is, the sum of your ages divided by the number of you who told us your ages) is 40.3 years; while the **median** age (that is, the age that 50% of you are older than) is 36. The oldest reported age was 80; the youngest, 13. Throughout this age range, however, we found (as other surveys have) that around 90% of you started reading science fiction between the ages of 6 and 16, inclusive.

As to education, 17% of you are full-time students; 93% have completed high school; 59% have completed four years of college; 33% have some advanced college; and 14% have doctorates in philosophy, science, or medicine. No clear pattern came from our questions about your major field of study in school, nor about your present occupation; you are doctors and engineers, farmers and sailors, managers and machinists.

We asked your income; the information *is* useful to us. Many of you chose not to answer this question. Of those

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who did, we found that your mean monthly income was $2,676; the median income was $1,600.

This survey, however, only sampled our regular subscribers; it gives us no picture at all of our newsstand buyers. That's why we put a business-reply-card questionnaire into the July, 1984, issue of *Amazing®*; we want to know something about you newsstand readers too. We're particularly interested in any differences between those of you who subscribe and those of you who pick up the magazine at bookstores and magazine stands. It's too early — as we type these words — to tell you the results of the July-issue survey, but we'll discuss those results in the magazine soon.

✂

INNSMOUTH HAUNT OF THE DRUIDS

Look at the
fish-faced men
Of the waters;
The bright eyes
As blue as waves
under the moon —
Their swimming no
More than a dance
Beneath the beautiful
Songs of Druids.

— Joey Froehlich

Well, yes; we *are* looking for stories, and from people who have never sold a story before as well as from long-time professionals. But no; we do not want to see you make the same mistakes, over and over again. So; we wrote and printed an 11,000 word booklet, *Constructing Scientifiction & Fantasy*, to help you with manuscript format, cover letters, return envelopes, and other details of story submission, along with some ideas on Plot, Background, Characterization, and Invention. These cost us two dollars each, with mailing and handling; we'd appreciate receiving this amount (check or money order, please; it's never wise to send cash through the mail). If you want two copies, send us $2.50; three copies, $3.00; and so on: in other words, 50¢ for each *additional* copy after the first one, which is $2.00. If you subscribe to **Amazing®** Science Fiction Stories today, we'll send you a copy of the booklet free.

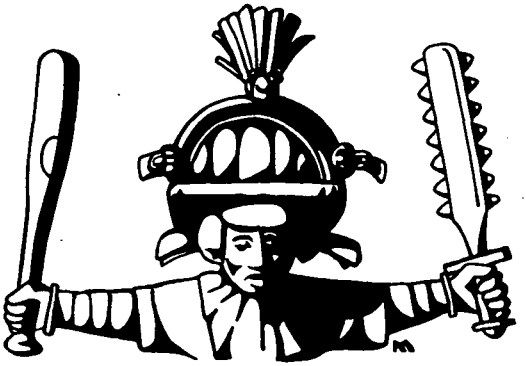
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THE MAYAN VARIATION

by Gardner Dozois

art: Keith Minnion



Gardner Dozois is a very funny fellow who was once noted for his claim of having the autograph of a prominent SF writer of the 1930's tattooed on his left breast. This has never been verified. For this and other reasons, mostly other reasons, he has long been in great demand as a speaker at science-fiction conventions. But don't be fooled. He is also the author of many intense and serious, if not grim stories, some of which may be found in his collection, The Visible Man. *Gardner has been nominated for more awards than almost anyone else (proving there is some justice in this world), although he has not, alas, ever won any (proving there is not enough). He is a co-founder of the Hugo and Nebula Loser's Club, which gives a party after the award ceremony each year at the World Science Fiction Convention.*

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The cops started to file into the stadium at the bottom of the ninth inning, and the crowd buzzed like a huge angry bee, an ominous razor-edged hum that set your teeth on edge.

Barnett, the third baseman, glanced up for a second to watch the cops spreading out in a thin line that encircled the playing field just inside the wall — a couple of them were on horseback, and some of them had dogs. He exchanged significant glances with Guerra, the second baseman, and Guerra shook his head and spat. The cops were certainly taking no chances today.

Shrugging, Barnett turned his attention back to the game. Lou Kesselman had just dropped the rosin bag and was about to go into his windup. Chuck Parrish stepped back into the batter's box and waggled his hips once or twice — he was one of those absolutely gigantic blacks who look more at home as NFL defensive linemen, and the bat looked like a willow-switch in his huge hands.

Kesselman went into his awkward-looking windup, all arms and legs and odd angles, like a scarecrow twisting in the wind, and then suddenly the ball was by Parrish, and Parrish had been caught looking.

The crowd howled.

3-2. A full count. Barnett wiped his sweating hands on his pants. It was 4-4 with two out in the bottom of the ninth, no men on base, the deciding game of the World Series, the home team at bat in their own ball park, and everything depended on the next few pitches.

Barnett tried to shout, provide a little encouraging infield chatter, but he was too dry to speak. He wiped his hands again; it was cold, the bite of the coming winter riding in the wind, but he was sweating like a pig. His stomach hurt. If only they could hold them, force the game into extra innings. The top of their lineup would be coming up in the tenth. . . .

Kesselman went into his windup, pitched, and Parrish took a terrific slice at the ball. There was the hard *thwack* of contact, and Barnett's heart stopped for a second, but it was only a low bouncer in foul territory.

The crowd noise, already incredibly loud, went up several notches, as if someone had twisted a volume control knob.

Kesselman was standing on the mound with his long arms dangling bonelessly and his head bowed, as if he was praying. Perhaps he *was*, Barnett thought. He had every right to be. He was one of the game's great southpaws, talked about the way people used to talk about Sandy Koufax and Steve Carlton, but it had been a grueling game on top of a long hard season, and the stakes for this particular game were as high as they ever got. . . .

Parrish popped another long shot foul. Koziakiewicz, the first baseman, chased it all the way up onto the dugout roof; but it fell several rows into the stands.

The umpire threw Kesselman a new ball; he picked it out of the air and

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climbed very slowly back onto the mound. He stood there for what seemed like hours, shaking off sign after sign, while Parrish swished his bat back and forth through the unresisting air. Finally, he nodded.

The crowd, which had been screaming its lungs out only a few seconds before, had suddenly become strangely quiet. Time seemed to slow down and stop, and for several long smothering heartbeats there was no motion anywhere on the field. Through the deathly hush, Barnett could hear the noise his teeth were making as they ground together. His muscles ached with tension, and he was sensing everything around him with an extraordinary crystalline precision he'd never known before: The sound of a car engine somewhere, faint and far away. The grim, set faces of the surrounding policemen. One of the police horses shuffling nervously and blowing out its lips in a snort, a white cloud of vapor rising from its nostrils. The fans in their seats, tier upon tier of them rising sheer into the steel-gray sky. The glint of light on camera lens. The umpire leaning forward behind home plate, hands on knees, his cheeks red and stiff with cold. A scrap of paper blowing across the infield. The same wind catching a loose end of the tarpaulin covering the structure that had been erected a few yards behind home plate, making the cloth flap with a heavy wet-canvas sound, like the beating of leather wings.

Kesselman pitched, and as soon as the ball left his hand, Barnett knew that Parrish was going to hit it.

He did, and it climbed into the sky toward left field, rising . . .

Barnett straightened slowly out of his crouch, watching hopelessly as the ball sailed high overhead, thinking in anguish, Christ, it's going to go out, it's going out . . .

Martinez, the left fielder, chased it past the warning track and made a tremendous leap up the outfield wall, stretching out desperately, but the ball whistled past his glove and out of the park with a yard to spare, and Martinez fell heavily back into the dirt.

Barnett stood there numbly, barely hearing the frenzied noise of the crowd, barely noticing the grinning Parrish as he went jogging by on his way around the bases. After a moment or two, Barnett grinned — grotesquely, ruefully, bitterly.

There would be no joy in Mudville. The game was over.

He looked over at Guerra, and Guerra's eyes were sick.

Gilchrist, the rightfielder, made a break for it, dodging through a gap in the line of cops and sprinting for the outfield wall. He was almost over it when two cops grabbed his ankles and hauled him back into the park. Gilchrist struggled frantically, and then a nightstick rose and fell, and he was clubbed to his knees. The cop clubbed Gilchrist again, knocking him face forward into the gravel of the warning track.

The ring of cops began to close in, like a noose tightening.

Sickened, Barnett turned away and threw his fielder's glove on the

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ground. Kesselman was already walking slowly toward home plate, his head down, and Martinez and Francesconi were coming in from the outfield, casting glances back at the two cops who were dragging Gilchrist along over the Astroturf.

He looked at Guerra again, and Guerra, his lips pale, said, "Well, tough luck on us, I guess."

Barnett shrugged. "Yeah," he said, and started walking in. His legs felt like water, and it was all he could do to keep himself moving forward. Over to one side, near the home team dugout, Parrish was being mobbed by his teammates in a frantic celebration, but that didn't concern them anymore; the leaping, gesticulating figures might just as well have been in another world. Ahead he could see his own teammates standing in a despondent group just beyond home plate, in front of the tarpaulin-covered structure, surrounded by a crowd of officials and jostling reporters with microphones and minicams. Amid a heat-shimmer of popping flashbulbs, the Baseball Commissioner pulled the tarpaulin away, and the waiting crowd cheered.

As Barnett crossed home plate, the reporters closed in around him, and he could hear the network color men chattering away:

". . . since its inception, fans have stopped complaining about inflated player salaries . . ."

". . . increased Series attendance . . ."

". . . the idea from the ancient Mayans, who played a kind of ball game of their own, and who, at the end of the game, would . . ."

". . . the losing team . . ."

Just ahead of Barnett, Kesselman screamed, a horrible, gurgling scream that seemed to hang endlessly in the air. Barnett stopped involuntarily, his heart thudding, but two cops grabbed him by the elbows and hustled him forward toward the waiting altar and the bloody knife.

INVISIBLE MACHINES

Their computers praying above the moveless mudscape
Four billion years before mind
These dreaming quadrants are redly tranquil
Still unpenetrated
By the bestial Priapus of instruments

— Andrew Joron &
Robert Frazier

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THE HOUSE SURGIS SWORD

by Avram Davidson

art: Alex Schomburg



To say, "Here is a different *story by Avram Davidson," is to use one word more than is strictly necessary.*

Here is a story by Avram Davidson.

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Slowly the House came to order, though the dull flop and clatter of chicken-bones and almond-nut-shells falling on the floor continued. When something like silence obtained, one arose at the head of the Housetable.

"I am Surgis Han Househead," he said. "I lead the House to victory, in war; and in peace, I maintain its honor." And sat down.

"I am Surgis Clea Housefemale," said the next to rise. "I am mother among mothers, first among equals, with Surgis Han Househead I share the great Housebed." And sat.

"I am Surgis Nel Housewebber. I lead the spinning and the weaving of the gorgeous fabrics which distinguish the males and females of the House in peace and war from those of other Houses, the equal and the less."

"There are none greater," growled the group.

One by one they rose and declared their grouptitles. There was Surgis Carl Housecutler, who kept sharp the knives and spearheads, Harold Househorseman was there, of whom a permitted jest was that his smell announced for him; also present was Delmar Housedogtender, who attended the Housedog on peacetime hunts, and whose further task it was, when so directed, to let slip the leash, meanwhile crying **Havoc!** Also rising and declaring title and duties was Surgis Syl Housespy, whose retirement had been expected for a pair of decades now, though still she thought herself capable: her last duty had been as a kitchenhelp in a certain other House, into whose small beer she regularly poured strong beer: and reported back the intelligence gained from their babble. So no one moved to depose her.

Yet.

One by one the holders of proud titles rose up and declared themselves and their titles and one by one sat their holders down again. Again there was a dull flop and clatter of chicken-bones and of almond-nut-shells on the floor.

"Have all spoken?" asked the justly-proud Surgis Han Househead.

No one rose, but a voice was nonetheless heard, in a low grumble-mutter. "I puts em out boxes and cans for peoples should be able ter trow bomes and shellkas inter," said the growl. "So what happens. Where dey trows um. Onna flaw." This was greeted by a snort or so, a sniff or so, and an abrupt harsh laugh. Or so.

"Oh for pity's sake," said Surgis Clea Housefemale. "Must we have this at every Great Housecouncil Session? Can the person not simply rise and declare, as do all others? Besides," she said, turning her head a bit aside, "the person *smells*. . . ." The person was not the Househorseman: no.

There were demands of **Rise, Rise, Declare**. Slowly from a far corner a figure emerged. "Who rates to shower last?" it asked. "When alla hot wawda is uze dup? An lotsa time; no maw soap leff? So how can I —"

But the proudly patient Househead had had enough. "Surgis Cedric Housethrall," said the Househead, "at a proper time and place you may move that a Householder be deposed and you fitted into his or her place instead of your present one. And/or you may challenge Surgis Bully House-

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champion to ordeal and combat. But —"

The mutter-mumble said, **Naa . . . naa**. . . . The Housechampion said nought. The figure in the far corner rose. "Om, uh, Surgis Cedric Housethrall, an I om clean up everybody's crap an crud. Sure. Why not. Oh sure. Who'm I?" The Champion lifted a mailed fist against the light. The sullen slattern figure sat down hastily in the corner once more. . . . A general sigh. A light one.

Then House Surgis got on with its new business, namely the outrageous conduct of the other Houses roundabout. It was well-known that The House had had a bad harvest, and yet no other House had advanced to fill its bread-bins and its rapidly-emptying chicken-coops and nut-baskets; if it were true, as claimed, that other Houses roundabout had had bad harvests, well, was that the fault of House Surgis? Certainly not. It was voted that War be declared, and, though this next was a mere formality, that Surgis Han Househead draw the Speaking Sword.

A mere formality because, after all, who else would draw it? and next, no one had ever heard the Sword speak.

But that was its *name*.

Han Househead arose and gave his cloak a toss and reached out his hand to draw the Sword.

The Sword spoke.

That is to say, it cried out in a shrill voice, "Oh leave me *alone!*"

Surgis Han Househead sat down abruptly. There was, for once, no other sound in the Great Housechamber. No one tossed a chicken-bone, no one cracked an almond-nut-shell. The words echoed in the silence. With a furious gasp, Clea Housefemale suddenly flew from her place and grasped with both hands for the hilt. Again the Sword spoke. "Get *away* from me, you *rotten thing!*" it exclaimed. Clea fell back. But still the House proceeded to do all in order; it was not until Surgis Bully Housechampion was repulsed with the cry, "All you ever think of is your own pleasure!", the sword somehow striking him a bloody blow about the knuckles, that a stir of unease rippled through the room.

"Thee won't do aught to *me*," said Surgis Carl Housecutler, confidently approaching. "Oftë have I sharpened thee, so," but the Sword, saying shrilly that it was *Tired!*, evaded his grasp.

After a while, praise was tried, blame was tried, the House went through it all, turn by turn, title by title, *twice*: the Sword would not be placated, and, at one point or other, somehow or other seemed to crawl down into its own scabbard and pull it in after it.

"We shall certainly win no war and fill no bread-bin *this* way," said . . . someone.

"I propose that the one who hasn't tried it yet should *try*. For goodness sake." At once it was obvious who was meant. Though not yet obvious to *him*. And so, finally . . . someone . . . said, "Well, never mind Cinderella and

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never mind the Sword in the Stone: who knows, the very stink of Cedric might turn the trick."

Guffaws.

Mostly nervous ones.

Some of them weaker than others.

Cedric was told what to do, he didn't do it, folk threw chicken-bones and almond-nut-shells at him, he dodged them, then he arose and went to do it. He did it. Well, he sort of did it. That is, he did actually seize hold of the hilt of the Sword. Then, dazed by his own presumption, there he stopped, with his slushy face turned round to face the company, and with his gappy mouth slack-open. And the Sword said, with a sigh in which one could sort of see the simper, "But you are so *rough*. . . ."

Unaccustomed success made Cedric bold.

"*Ah'll* rough yuz!" he said.

"Oh, you might *break* me!"

"*Ah*'ll break yuz!"

The Sword jiggled in its scabbard. "Break me! Break me!" it cried.

"Ah'll pound yuz against a great big rock an dint yuz!"

"Oh, dent me! Dent me!"

Then, addressing the Sword rather in the tone of voice he might have dared use to an apprentice scullion, Surgis Cedric Housethrall said, "Ged *ow*da dere!" The Sword got. Cedric stood alone, with the Speaking Sword sort of palpitating in the dirty hands of him.

The silence was at length broken by Surgis Buford Housebutler's saying he was off at once to heat hot water and prepare vanilla-scented soap and warmed towels. Surgis Bully Housechampion did not throw down his mailed gauntlet. He very politely set it down and placed Cedric's foot on top of it. And Surgis Lulu Househoyden came forward and, not saying a word, caught Cedric's eye and hoisted her hynie.

Surgis Han Househead blubbered and sniffled and spoke of past heroisms: to no avail. Ever since has he performed the duties of Housethrall, much moaning about chicken-bones and almond-nut-shells. But Surgis Cedric Househead went right briskly to the other Houses roundabout, the Speaking Sword in hand and Speaking of the simply unSpeakable things it would *do* if — or if not — followed by the other Surgis Males- and Females-at-arms, as well as the Dog of War (who was really too much a martyr to senile canine colitis to be safely let slip); and, what with one thing and another, not only were the House Surgis bread-bins filled, but something was supplied for the smokehouse, the larder, the buttery, and the stillery-room, as well. Cedric and Lulu kicked not only Han and Clea out of softest and featheriest places in the great Housebed, but Clea out of her role as Housefemale; however, she fills that of Househoyden passing well.

The Sword has not really been heard to Speak again.

But now and then it Snickers.

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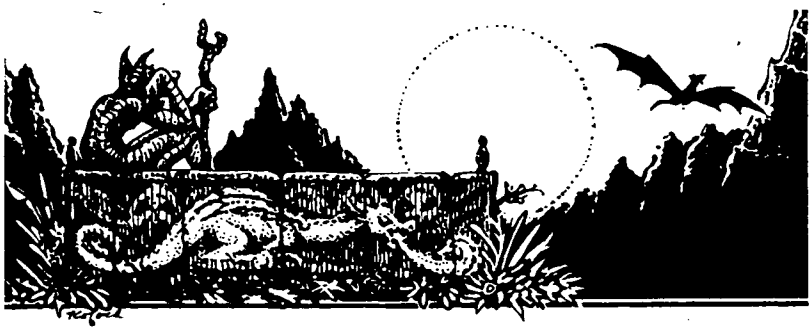
WEREWOLF

Among the shadow strips of tree, he weaves
Ecstatic patterns. Timber wind
And hazy moon tingle in his blood and dreams;
They mingle with his soul.
An ancient curse that feels like freedom, grows.
It moans to a howl — escaping his life
Of daily, careful nothing.

Living in a bell jar with his mother, polished
By her grinding love, he aches for the sight
Of a round, cold moon advancing on the hill.
Werewolf. The word can fill
His throat and line his stomach with pleasure.
"Even a man who is pure at heart
And says his prayers at night. . . ."

Dark air bloats the curtains open. . . .
It prickles his skin like carbonation
And jerks a muscle in his face. For an evening,
He is secret. A sacrament
Of golden light will expiate all sin,
As he is everything that's wild
And always wished to be.

— Wendy McElroy



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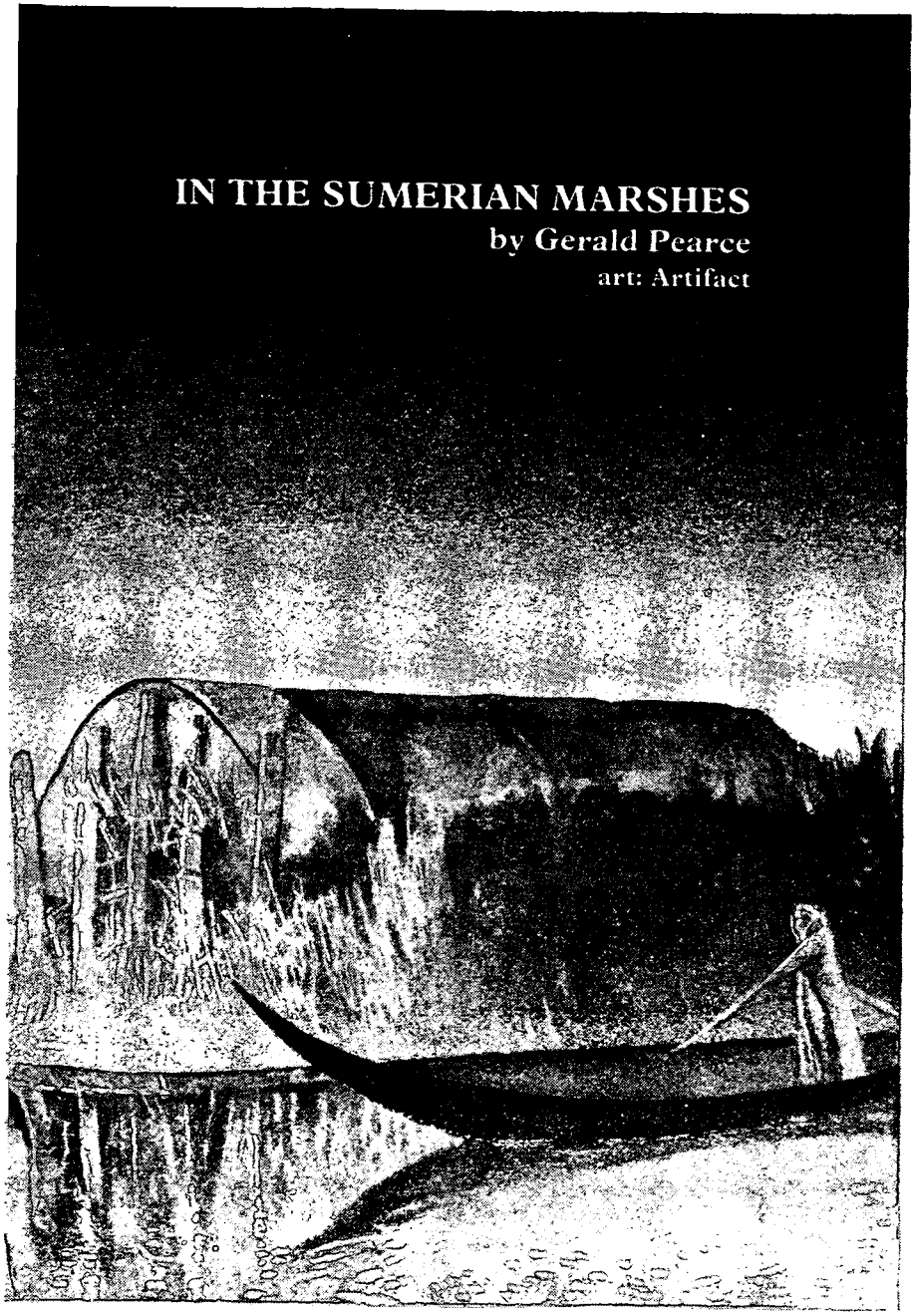


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IN THE SUMERIAN MARSHES

by Gerald Pearce

art: Artifact



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"A lot of [this story] just happened, unplanned," says Gerald Pearce. But the Middle Eastern setting was very familiar to the author when he was growing up, and he has brought that once remote fringe of British Empire vividly to life here. At the center of the knot — a native mind-reader.

Gerald writes that his joy at this sale goes far beyond the house payments, or the cat food, or the law school tuition it would pay for. "Not much factual autobiography here but yes, I did live in Amara during the 1930s. . . . The spying business really was going on back then, though I didn't learn about it until I was 27 and living in Hollywood." The author writes further that he is sorry to report no Amsha in his past.

He has a non-fiction book on the Middle East due out in 1984, and among his latest words to us: "I seem to be involved in a new project which sort of breathed down my neck."

No one told me there was supposed to be a wizard in the marshes until the day Captain Carmady and his friend flew down from Baghdad.

We didn't see or even hear many planes over Amara in those days, so even my mother couldn't ignore the sound of two of them diving low over our garden. She took the spelling book from Jill's hands and told her to skedaddle. Jill took off like a rabbit, pigtails flying, emitting happy shrieks — "It's them! It's them!" — as she shot out of the French window and crossed the covered verandah onto the sunlit lawn.

"You too, Roger," my mother said indulgently. There was always a faint air of disapproval in her indulgence. It had a way of anesthetizing spontaneity. So instead of tearing noisily after my sister, I put the algebra book in its place on the shelf and my copybook and pencil and eraser in my desk — it was my Christmas holiday but my mother discouraged loafing — before following at a more dignified lope. It could be trying, having a mother who had taught school.

One of the Bristol biplanes, the target insignia of the Royal Air Force brave and bright on wings and fuselage, was completing a loop against placid tattered clouds lying in random patterns against a robin's-egg sky. The Bristol wasn't the latest thing in aerial technology but this was 1935: the Spitfire hadn't been designed yet, and the first Hurricane wouldn't be delivered for a couple more years; meantime the Bristol would do. And now it came snarling out of the loop in an almost vertical dive aimed directly between our two Persian lilac trees, not pulling out until it seemed no higher than the roof. Jill rushed about shrieking in delicious terror until our father came out onto the verandah and told her Captain

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Carmady would think she'd gone daft.

Jill ran to me, short plaid dress flying, skinny arms upraised. I scooped her off the lawn. I suppose even a stocky just-thirteen can seem a pillar of strength to a tiny five. She got an armlock on my neck and squealed that Captain Carmady was going to land his aeroplane in the *middle* of *our grass*, and the two Bristols began doing spins and dives and rolls for our benefit.

Our father was a big man starting to go slack in the middle. He stood on the edge of the verandah with his hands in the pockets of his gray flannels, his chin lifted, watching the show with a small proud grin under his dark mustache. Our mother came out and joined him. She was tall, rather ungainly, with gray-flecked reddish hair and sensible shoes. Sometimes I thought she had trouble remembering that southern Iraq wasn't a disquieting dream from which she would wake to find herself in safe, sane southern England. Her spirit swelled. Those plucky little planes! Those British markings! — our surroundings might be alien but those were our chaps up there and that made everything all right. For myself, I thought of them as eagles, invincible and free, laughing at danger and dealing out justice and fair play in unmapped corners of the Empire.

Of course Iraq wasn't part of the Empire, but that was a technicality we tried to ignore. After all, there were big British air bases here as well as British businesses, the British community constituted a privileged class, and English was the widely spoken second language. And the country was hardly unmapped, having been a center of civilization long before Greek geographers began calling most of it Mesopotamia. Within its borders lay the remains of ancient Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Niniveh. Ur of the Chaldees was a silent excavated ruin eighty-odd miles away, and Harun al-Rashid's Baghdad straddled the Tigris eight hours' dusty drive to the northwest. And this was Amara, also on the Tigris, and not far from Amara the marshes began, where the only transport was the slender canoe and people built reed houses on artificial islands in the quiet, still waters — and where a man could shoot giant boar which had tusks like scimitars.

It was the prospect of a wild-pig hunt that had brought Captain Carmady and his friend down for this visit. At least that was what I'd been told.

I had known Captain Carmady since I was a toddler. He was less a personality than a presence: tallish, brownish, with thinning hair and tobacco-stained teeth, uncomfortable around children and almost as animated as a tin soldier. He and my father had been comrades in arms during the Mesopotamia campaign in 1917 - 18. Not the sort of man who would announce his arrival by doing stunts in a fighter plane over your front lawn. Perhaps it had been his friend's idea.

We would know soon enough because the show was over. The two Bristols circled the house and grounds and headed for the airfield beyond

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the date gardens on the other side of the Tigris. My father started the green Ford touring car while Ali the gardener opened the gate at the end of the graveled drive. His mellow, nostalgic mood hadn't lasted. When I asked if I could go along for the drive he said curtly, "No. Captain Carmady doesn't want to listen to a lot of nattering about aëroplanes," and drove off.

Ali closed the gate behind him. I wasn't all that interested in planes, I just wanted to get off the grounds. I wasn't allowed out alone. I guess my parents were afraid I'd encounter a ravening paederast lurking just beyond the gate. I hung around and kicked some gravel until my mother scolded me for ruining my shoes.

In a while we heard engines and saw the Bristols climb over the distant palm groves; they'd return the day after tomorrow morning. Soon the green Ford drove through the front gate. Whiskey, the liver-and-white cocker spaniel, and Regina, she of the long legs and lolling tongue, part Irish setter and part God knows what, all good nature with the brains of a geranium, became noisily ecstatic to have their master home. Still gripped by the excitement of the air show, Jill ran around in small circles then shot into the hall and ran into the coat rack. I picked her up.

Our mother followed us into the hall. She had put on a fresh blue dress. "Jill, you're not to bother our guests."

I let Jill through the door as the car drew up beyond the verandah with a sagging crunch of gravel. I didn't hurry after her to show I didn't have to. My mother looked faintly amused. Being laughed at for not acting like a kid was no improvement over being scolded for acting like one. I went outside as Tariq, one of the servants, who wore a regular *agal*-and-*kaffiyya* Arab headdress and an ankle-length nightshirt-like *dishdasha*, arrived to handle the luggage and control the dogs, and my father and two men in dusty and only faintly military khaki got out of the car.

The taller one, who had been sitting in the front seat, was Captain Carmady. Both men reached into the back seat and produced Lee-Enfield .303 rifles. The shorter one also slung a heavy knapsack over one shoulder and carried a leather flyer's helmet by the chin strap. He had short dark hair and looked absurdly young.

"Hello, young Roger," Captain Carmady said with his wintry smile. "You've grown."

Of course I had: he hadn't seen me in six months. But I hadn't grown much, so I could make the ritually modest noises required in response to explicit or implied praise without feeling dishonest.

My father waved a hand. "My son, Roger." He indicated the younger man. "This is Captain Stark."

I said something formal. Captain Stark muttered "Hold on there!" with the beginnings of a grin and switched the rifle and flying helmet

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from his right hand to his left and then stuck out his right for me to shake. "Hello, Roger. How are you?" He smiled. His face was tanned, and his teeth were very white, and his smile as open and disarming as a child's. The casual uniform, the rifle, the flying helmet and the smile made him a real-life embodiment of the devil-may-care adventurer who served the Crown in song and story.

I shook his hand and smiled back and said, "Very-well-thank-you, I enjoyed the air show you gave us."

"Did you? I'm delighted," Captain Stark said, and Jill ran up and planted herself in front of him, elfin face small and avid as a cat's, blue eyes glittering.

"Was that *you* in that aeroplane?"

"Yes, I was in one of them."

"Were you *driving*?"

"Yes I was."

"Could you see *me* down on the ground?"

"Yes I could," Captain Stark said. "You were running around like a little mouse with yellow pigtails."

Jill stared up at him for a count of three, then turned and ran and hid behind our mother's skirts. Mother was talking to Captain Carmady by the front door. Captain Carmady introduced Captain Stark.

"You've almost met my daughter, Jill," my mother said, trying with one hand to haul her out of hiding. "Not on her best behavior today, I'm afraid. Don't let the children make nuisances of themselves."

"Oh, all right," he said with mock reluctance, and gave her his smile. Her eyes got stiff. "But frankly, Mrs. Grant, Jill is a treasure and young Roger a man of the world. I'm not sure how either could be a nuisance."

She wasn't used to being charmed. She said with tinny social gaiety, "Oh, I'm afraid I know them better than you do. Shall we go inside and get you settled?"

She ushered him through the front door, turning to throw me a quick little frown of disapproval.

After sundown, the day went to hell in a handcart.

It had grown chilly. Tariq lit a fire in the drawingroom; we had tea, with drop scones and sponge cake and little jam tarts, in its companionable warmth. The my mother took Jill off to give her her bath.

Captain Stark, I decided, wasn't quite as young as he'd first looked. The right light brought out fine but well-developed crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, which had a smudged weariness when he wasn't smiling. But he smiled a lot. Actually he was twenty-eight. He told us he had just been reassigned from India, where he had almost died of boredom; he hoped our marshes would provide a bit of adventure. Was it true the big boars weighed up to 400 pounds and stood four feet at the

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shoulder? My father assured him that they did, the biggest ones anyway. "Bad tempered blighters. Can't go against 'em with a fishing spear or a single-barreled 12-bore loaded with number sixes, though some of the marsh Arabs have had to, poor devils. Nasty business."

"And these marsh Arabs actually get about in canoes instead of on camels?"

"Have done since the beginning of time."

"Amazing!" Captain Stark said with relish.

"When they dug up Ur," I explained, "they found a silver model of a canoe that's practically the same as the ones they use now. A picture of a reed house, too."

Captain Stark's interest led my father into a long discussion of life in the marshes. He was only really familiar with some of the shepherd and cultivator tribes who live around the edges with one foot on dry land, growing rice and wheat and barley; but I don't suppose there were half a dozen Europeans who knew as much. Or even as much as me, just thirteen-year-old Roger Grant, who had been visiting the marshes since the age of four. I enjoyed the comfortable illusion of being part of the discussion, though I felt no urge to contribute. My father talked, Captain Stark listened and asked an occasional question, Captain Carmady sat in the low-slung wooden-armed chair and occasionally nodded or murmured assent or approval, and the dogs — who had been fed — dozed contentedly in front of the fire.

When my mother had put Jill to bed and rejoined us, my father rang for Tariq and ordered whiskey and soda.

Captain Carmady turned to me and said stiffly, "I'll bet you're getting anxious to get back to school in Alexandria, young Roger."

I gave him an apologetic smile. "Well, actually, no."

The eyebrows rose a little in his weathered face.

"You *aren't?* Don't you miss the games?"

He meant cricket and soccer, but I couldn't get enthused about organized team sports.

"I feel like a foreigner there."

"Aren't you a foreigner *here?*"

". . . Well, yes, I suppose so, but I've lived here most of my life."

"By Jove, so you have, haven't you?" He turned a sardonic eye on my father, gave a faintly wicked grin. "I say, Grant, isn't it time you sent this young chap home? He'll be going native."

"I doubt it," my father said. "He's been properly brought up. Actually, with his knowledge of the language and the people, I think he'll be a useful man at the Embassy one day."

"Doesn't sound too adventurous." Captain Stark threw me a sympathetic grin. "Of course you could always run off and join the army."

"And get sent to India to die of boredom?"

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The answer skirted the edges of impertinence, as I knew as soon as I had said it; but they took it in the spirit intended: everyone laughed, and Tariq came in with a loaded brass tray. He made the rounds of the grownups, serving Johnnie Walker Black Label and locally bottled sodawater.

Captain Stark pursued thoughtfully, "Not afraid of guns or anything like that, are you?"

"Actually," I said, nettled into saying something that might sound boastful, "I'm rather good with guns."

The winning smile. "I say, are you really? Let's see if your Dad confirms that. Would you say he was rather good with guns, Mr. Grant?"

"Oh, I suppose so. With a shotgun and a .22, nothing big. Started him early." My father raised his glass. "Cheer-ho."

"Rather," said Captain Stark. "Confusion to our enemies."

"Hear, hear," Captain Carmady said.

My mother smiled mechanically. Tariq disappeared toward the back of the house and everybody drank. Captain Stark said, "Mr. Grant — about this chap Ibn Khaldun. He *is* going to be at the village tomorrow, isn't he?"

"If he is, it'll be arrogance. If he isn't, it'll be cowardice."

Everyone laughed again.

"Ibn Khaldun?" my mother asked.

"Oh! — didn't I get the name right?" Captain Stark smiled apologetically. "You know, the chap who's setting himself up as some sort of wizard."

My mother looked blank. "Wizard?"

"Well, mind-reader actually," Captain Carmady said in his unemphatic way. "That's what they say. You know him, don't you, Mrs. Grant? Wasn't he third boy or something on your household staff a few years ago?"

"Do you mean *Jasim?*" I asked incredulously. Also impolitely, in my father's estimation. His eyebrows pulled together to remind me that the presence of guests demanded my best behavior.

"Oh, *Jasim,*" my mother said. "Of course I've heard about the rumors. But he was just a boy when he worked for us, scrubbing floors and so on, such a *vague* sort, so dreamy and disconnected. I always wondered if he was quite *right*, if you know what I mean. He can't be more than seventeen."

"That's grownup among the tribes," my father said. "There was enough unrest down south this past year, Baghdad doesn't want something similar starting in the marshes."

"Do they know about Jasim in Baghdad?" I asked, impressed.

"What do you know about Jasim?" Captain Carmady said.

"Nothing. He's just someone I know. He's Jasim ibn Khaldun and he

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lives in a marsh village called Saidiyya. What happened down south?"

"A tribal rising," my father explained airily, "while you were away at school. The tribes don't think the government's fair to them, or something. They were put down, of course. The young king doesn't need a civil war on his hands, even a minor one, and of course we support the king, even if he is a silly hot-head. The country's only been a country in the modern sense for a few years. Can't risk having things fall apart."

For my father, whose explanations were usually too gruffly telegraphic to explain anything, that was an encyclopedic revelation of the workings of the grownup world, and very welcome.

"Do you think there's going to be a tribal rising among the marsh Arabs?" I asked him.

"Not really," he said in a voice of diminishing interest.

"They're a pretty independent people, from everything your father's told us," Captain Carmady said. He had been quietly stuffing a short-stemmed pipe that looked like a relic from the Boer war. Now he shoved his tobacco pouch into a pocket and struck a match. He gave me his wintry smile. "Be hard to put down a rising if there was one, though. Can't drive an armored car through the marshes!" He applied the flame to the pipe and got it going with a few puffs. "You see, Roger, this Ibn Khaldun chap could stir up trouble *outside* the marshes."

"Has he stirred up trouble inside them?"

"We don't really know. But these people are such a superstitious lot, as you know, they'll put their trust in any mountebank that comes along, and that sort always ends up causing the most awful bother. Look at the Mahdi in the Sudan fifty years ago."

I didn't know too much about the Mahdi. Something to do with General Gordon and the fall of Khartoum.

"I can't see old Jasim," I said, "as the same sort of bad hat as the Mahdi."

"Well, no, of course not. But if Jasim gets a reputation as a wizard, and then some bad hat gets hold of him, then all the people who believe in Jasim might join up with the bad hat, d'you see?" He took a couple of puffs at his pipe while I nodded. "Of course nobody thinks he's a *real* wizard or anything like that, you understand, but it's what the natives believe that'll do the damage.

"So what we want to do," Captain Carmady went on, "is meet him and talk to him and find out how these stories got started. Nothing wrong with that. Only sensible. We sort of thought you could help us, knowing the language so well. You know, be detective for us, sort of Bulldog Drummond in the Sumerian marshes."

I had an instant vision of the men of Saidiyya village squatting around coffee hearths chatting while I picked their brains as coolly as Bulldog Drummond or Jim Maitland or even Nayland Smith. It was a heady

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fantasy, but I didn't give in to it. My father would never approve. He always said I was too young when I wanted to do anything outside the small boy routine. I think he meant he didn't trust me not to make a fool of him. So, hiding my enthusiasm to avoid embarrassment when the proposal was vetoed, I looked toward him — and heard my mother exclaim, "Oh, I say, that *does* sound exciting, Roger!" in such a tone of dismay that I realized she must already have given her consent, even as I saw that my father was not frowning. He sat with his gray flannel knees crossed, the whiskey and soda in his hand catching the firelight, wearing the equivocal smile I had long ago learned to equate with my mother's indulgent look. Rather than disapproval, however, it carried the conviction that even legitimate pleasure must have unwelcome consequences. Like a scorpion, there was a sting in its tail. But the sting was invisible.

But all he said, in mild reproof, was, "Nothing very exciting, really. Just listen, and remember what you hear," and I understood that the plan was on.

I still wasn't going to let my enthusiasm show. I sat very quietly at the end of the sofa and said, striving for an offhand tone, "All right."

His smile became more jovial. "I expect you'll get to see Amsha."

I was suddenly on guard. The sting of the scorpion was now visible.

"Yes," I said carefully.

"Who's Amsha?" Captain Carmady asked.

"A girl we know in Saidiyya."

"Isn't she your girlfriend?" my father prodded.

"No."

Everyone laughed heartily. Back then, for a boy to have a girlfriend was considered excruciatingly funny; so was for a boy to deny having a girlfriend, even truthfully. Perhaps it was part of some pointless grownup ritual. Inevitably, embarrassingly, I felt my face getting red. Resentment I hadn't the vocabulary to express tied my tongue and left me sputtering like a fuse.

The laughter died.

"Amsha," Captain Carmady said meditatively. "Hasn't she got a scoundrel brother called Imshi?"

Imshi was the colloquial equivalent of go away, buzz off, be missing. More laughter; but this time when it had died so had my diffident small-boy manner. My fuse had stopped sputtering. I had the feeling I was about to jump off a cliff.

"*Imshi*," I said clearly, "is the imperative form of the verb *yamshi*, he walks."

As someone said, it's not what you say, it's how you say it.

Only Captain Stark did not look as though the roof had fallen in on him. He sat very still, watching me, not smiling though a great wide brilliant smile hovered just below his sober expression and banished the

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weary smudges from his eyes: Captain Stark was enjoying himself. Captain Carmady, on the other hand, wore the baffled look of a man betrayed by a pet goldfish. My mother looked disbelieving and sorrowful.

She breathed my name, "Roger . . . !" in a whispery downturning voice. "I'm sorry, Captain Carmady, he's not himself —"

"Oh, I'm myself," I contradicted. "Never more so."

"You're blushing," my father said in a voice of cold iron. "You've embarrassed yourself."

"No." Rebellion could be dangerously exhilarating, even when sweeping toward defeat. "You went out of your way to make me feel small and silly and a fool."

"That's exactly what you are. Apologize to Captain Carmady."

"What for?"

"You know perfectly well what for. Apologize. At once."

"Explain what for."

"You. Insolent. Young. Brat. Call me 'sir' when you address me."

That was a new one. It caught me by surprise.

"All right," I said.

"All right, *what*?"

"All right, *sir*."

I never called him anything but *sir* from that moment on. Not Daddy or Dad or Father, or that ridiculous Latin hangover from the British "public" school, Pater. I did it inflexibly, satirically, vengefully. I think he got to hate it but was too stubborn to admit it; it might have implied the concession that he'd over-reacted. If he had asked me to stop I'd have been glad to.

"Go to your room," he said now. "Lights out. No reading. You may come out when you're ready to apologize."

"All right." I stood up and included everyone in what I hoped was a casual unbothered smile. "Good night."

In bed, in the dark, the wave of exhilaration passed and left me cold and gray and empty.

But not contrite. I was supposed to be contemplating my crime of non-compliance with the adult world's concept of propriety and order; but that concept persisted in seeming arbitrary and unfair, opposing it a duty I had only just found the courage to assume. What was the worst they could do to me? Ship me to boarding school in England, where I would be more of a foreigner than I felt at boarding school in Alexandria, Egypt. Deprive me of the flat deserts of Sumer and Akkad, and of the flatter marshes, mile upon mile of reeds and rushes and changing lagoons and watercourses between islands of floating vegetation. Deprive me of the delicious tension, which I always felt on coming to the marshes, between tranquility and the anticipation of incandescent adventure. Rob

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me of tomorrow, of course. No trip to Saidiyya for me. No detective work in the village while the grownups hunted boar. No Amsha.

Amsha wasn't my girlfriend, but I wanted to see her. I had known her since I was five or six, and thought of her as being about my age. She was then a tiny slender dart-like child with a lot of dark hair, glowing golden skin, and great dark eyes. An only child whose father had died of typhoid, she was already going out alone in a canoe to gather rushes as fodder for the diminished family's three water buffalo. A year later Amsha's mother remarried and subsequently died in childbirth, so Amsha was taken into the household of her mother's brother Khaldun. Khaldun had been in charge of the canoe boys when my father first went hunting pig with Shaykh Khalaf al-Hatim of the Bani Sukhair tribe. Khaldun's youngest son was the Jasim who had come to work for us and was now being called a wizard.

I had not seen Amsha since my Easter vacation, when we had taken a Sunday drive to Saidiyya so my father could talk business to one of Shaykh Khalaf's stewards. In late morning we arrived at the dry-land part of the village where there was a scattering of date trees, a mud-walled pen with a few cows in it, and a few reed houses with curved roofs of split reed matting laid over a frame of arched-over bundled reed columns. We stopped where we usually did, where the last of the date palms nodded against the sky and were reflected in sudden still water. Behind us was the desert, before us alternating water and vegetation, bullrushes and tall golden reeds, stretching hypnotically to the horizon.

Out on the water, before the first wandering green wall began, other reed houses stood on artificial islands built up of reed matting and vegetation sunk in five or six feet of water and providing just enough room for a house and a platform behind it for a few water buffalo. Slim high-prowed canoes were tied to some of the islands; others moved between the houses, and a few more were drawn up on the bank below the dry-land village.

Amsha was climbing the bank toward us as Jill and I got out of the Ford. She was wearing a threadbare red dress I remembered seeing on an older cousin a couple of visits back, and had a thin black shawl tied around her head. She led a toddler by the hand, the two-year-old son of Jasim's older brother, a grubby, chubby kid with doubt in his eyes, wearing a tattered garment that came down to his knees. While Jill was saying hello and starting to make a fuss over the little one, I was noticing that Amsha had changed. She was still small and slender but there were two interesting soft bumps under her dress where before there had been just ribs, and though her smile was as ready as ever, when she wasn't smiling her stillness held a baffling new self-containment.

The toddler's name was Abadi. Amsha picked him up and carried him with practiced ease on her outthrust hip for my mother to admire; which

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she did, without much enthusiasm, in a mixture of bad kitchen Arabic and English spoken in an outlandish accent: English that sounded foreign was supposed to be easier for a foreigner to understand. Amsha didn't, of course. Abadi had an attack of shyness and buried his face under her chin. My mother chuckled, Amsha tried to put the baby down against its will and he grabbed the collar of her dress and ripped it down to the waist. I found myself staring at Amsha's right breast.

My mouth went dry. I'd seen the occasional accidentally exposed breast before, and watched babies nurse; but what Amsha had been hiding under her red dress was magic: small, round, golden, with a nipple that looked almost transparent. And its twin was only slightly less visible. My brain began to fibrillate. In two seconds I was turned from what my parents kept calling a small boy into a lusting male. I had never seen anything so miraculously *pretty*. Of course it was impolite to stare but the only alternative that occurred to me was to turn cartwheels in the dust, which would only draw attention.

"Oh, dear," my mother said, frowning severely first at Amsha's breast, as though she found it a serious moral failing that she had one, and then at me, shaking her head as though to warn me away from danger. "What a shame, such a nice dress too." Amsha matter-of-factly pried the kid's fingers from the cloth and pulled the torn edges together while my mother rummaged in the capacious hand-bag she always took on outings and found an open packet of small safety pins. I had the sense to step discreetly out of the line of sight while the repair was being made — that frown was not to be ignored — though I realized that this would only reinforce my mother's favorite delusion about her son: a small boy, good at lessons, good with guns — and not interested in girls. And of course once the red dress had been mended with too many safety pins, why, the dangerous native nipple was out of sight and we were all children together in a bright fresh nursery world.

Somewhere in the village a couple of watchdogs began barking furiously.

I never remembered other details of that visit to Saidiyya. A few days later I was on my way back to boarding school in Alexandria where I kept hearing the marshes calling to me. They were incomparably more brilliant, more mysterious, more *real* than anything in the almost medieval curriculum. My studies suffered, though not much. I was a conscientious scholar; I did well because I could, and because it was expected of me, and because I hadn't learned how to disappoint grownup expectations. Not good reasons. They encourage resentment.

And then my bedroom light was on. I must have fallen asleep somewhere along the line because I felt rested and rebellious and ready to show the world a stiff upper lip, a proud tilt to the chin.

My mother's voice said cheerfully, "Up you get, Roger, no time to

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dawdle. You'll need a good breakfast if you're going to the marshes."

I wasn't dreaming. People were moving about in the house, my mother was dressed and opening my chest of drawers and taking out my jodhpurs, warm woollen knee-length socks, a turtleneck pullover —

"You'll need these, it's going to be cold. Really now, you must get up. You do *want* to go, don't you?"

Had my father had a change of heart? Or did he really need me enough to pretend that last night's sentence had never been passed?

I had sense enough not to ask.

The sun was invisible.

For an hour and a half we bounced along a desert track under a featureless low overcast. My father drove the Ford, Captain Carmady beside him. Captain Stark and I shared the back seat with the two rifles, two shotguns including the Grant family's aging "guest gun," haversacks containing boxes of ammunition, a picnic basket, and a couple of Thermos bottles of strong tea. Nobody said much. Captain Stark was moody; when he turned on his smile I felt it was just a formality. I continued to wonder at my even being there.

Then dry-land Saidiyya came in sight; in moments the village-on-water appeared behind it, beyond which the marsh was a mystery of gray still water and screens of reeds and rushes wandering to the edge of the world.

We drove into the village. Ragged kids rushed out of nowhere, yelling; muscular, crop-eared dogs barked angrily. We parked in our usual spot and got out.

Captain Stark looked about him, his smile distant, empty.

"Doesn't look like much, does it?"

The kids stopped yelling and watched us solemnly. A couple of them threw clods of earth at the dogs to chase them off and shut them up. I didn't see Amsha anywhere. Then her uncle Khaldun, Jasim's father, ducked out of a low doorway and came toward us, followed by a boy a little older than myself.

Jasim's new fame hadn't visibly improved Khaldun's status. He looked like any middle-aged villager in the marshes: lean, a bit stooped, wearing an *agal*-and-*kaffiyya* headdress and a thin, grubby, brown wool cloak over a long, cotton robe. The face framed by the drape of his *kaffiyya* was seamed and friendly, with a three-day growth of nearly white beard. His smile revealed several missing teeth and almost hid his eyes in a nest of wrinkles.

Greetings were usually prolonged and effusive. My father cut them off abruptly. His Arabic was rather basic and his accent hopeless, but he had no trouble making himself understood. He had a touching faith in the power of his displeasure to make foreigners behave.

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"I sent word I wanted to talk to Jasim. Why isn't he here?"

Khaldun never lost his smile or the twinkle in his eyes, but for a couple of seconds he was very still. Then he made a regretful gesture.

"He is with Shaykh Khalaf, sahib."

"Is he now so important?"

"There is work he must do."

"He's only a boy. Can he paddle a canoe or drive a car better than any man of the Bani Sukhair?"

"So it seems," Khaldun said placatingly. He took refuge in a piety. "God is kind. But do not worry, sahib; Jasim will be here. Soon! — if God wills it. And Abbas the shaykh's steward asks that you be his guests for lunch in the *mudhif*."

A *mudhif* was a guest house, a statelier and more spacious version of the reed-and-matting marsh dwelling. The one Abbas maintained here stood on dry land a few feet from the water at the far end of the village.

My father accepted Abbas's invitation, thanked Khaldun for conveying it, and then, dropping his prosecutorial manner, asked about his other sons and their children. If Khaldun thought this change of gear abrupt he gave no sign, simply smiled and said that God was merciful, his family was well, little Abadi the youngest grandchild was plump and healthy, praise be to God; and of course no one said a word about Amsha. Khaldun introduced the boy who had tagged along behind him as a responsible lad who would look after the Ford in our absence; and then he was shambling down to the water's edge, yelling to someone in one of the island houses that the sahib had come, the canoes were needed, and men to paddle them.

"Bit rough on the old boy, weren't you?" murmured Captain Carmady.

"If we're to discredit Jasim," my father said, "I want the entire Bani Sukhair tribe to know I'm unhappy with him. The Bani Sukhair don't want me unhappy. I buy up most of their grain harvest and their wool and sheepskins. They know they get fair dealing and fair prices from me."

He opened the rear door of the Ford and got a couple of oranges out of the picnic basket; he gave them to me and told me to get acquainted with our young watchman. Then he started offloading the guns and ammunition; and I walked over to the boy, who was loitering about looking discontented.

I gave him an orange and told him my name; he said his was Hamad. He was ridiculously good-looking, with warm-toned brown skin and clear, decisive features, the beginnings of a mustache a silky dark shadow on his upper lip. We peeled the oranges at the edge of the marsh and threw the rinds into the water.

Hamad tore his orange in half and nodded up the slope toward the car.

"Why is the sahib angry?"

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"He's not angry."

"He is. When Jasim comes, he will know why."

"How?"

"He'll know. You'll see."

My orange was hard to divide. My thumb dug into it and the juice started running over my wrist. I shoved the sleeve of my pullover up out of the way. These were Mandali oranges, from a place up beyond Baghdad, small modest thin-skinned fruit of extraordinary flavor. I pulled mine apart and crammed a dripping hemisphere between my teeth and bit down. A torrent of juice bathed my mouth.

"They say," I said after a moment, "that Jasim can hear unspoken thoughts. But supposing someone is English, and his thoughts are in English?"

He chewed solemnly, swallowed, nodded.

"He knows everything there is to know." He sniggered suddenly, looking furtive. "He must know the secret thoughts of girls."

— And of boys and young men too. My belly went cold. I would have to keep my mind off Amsha when Jasim was around. But that meant I thought he really was a mind-reader. Which was impossible. Wasn't it?

"How does he do it?"

"Sorcery, of course," Hamad said.

I knelt to rinse the orange juice off my hands; and a couple of marsh canoes, silent as swans, black with bitumen, their slender prows vaulting free of the water in proud fantastic curves, came into view and headed our way.

I carried our guest gun down to the water.

"Did you learn anything?" my father asked.

"Hamad believes in the mind-reading. He says it's sorcery."

My father laughed shortly. "Silly young fool." He dug into the pocket of his shooting jacket, actually a shapeless old sportcoat with leather patches on the sleeves, and handed me a couple of 12-bore cartridges. It wasn't until after a trans-Atlantic migration that I learned to say 12-*gauge*. "Remember, load only one barrel and don't release the safety-catch till your bird's in the air. Mind you! — no firing at pig if we see any."

"Yes, sir."

Birdshot from more than a few feet away would only annoy a pig. Buckshot was possible but a .303 rifle was safer. Having no rifle, my father hunted them with his shotgun loaded not with a handful of shot but a single lethal ball capable of stopping an elephant. He had those cartridges in his other pocket. I secretly wished to be allowed to fire one but not enough to risk another "you're-not-old-enough" refusal.

The canoes were perhaps 25 feet long, at most 3 feet wide with only a

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few inches of freeboard. A couple of feet at bow and stern were decked over to give the paddlers somewhere to sit or crouch; everyone else sat on the removable floorboards. My father and Khaldun and I took one canoe, with Khaldun's eldest son Alwan and a gaunt, unshaven, smiling villager I didn't know manning the paddles, while Captain Carmady and Captain Stark with two other villagers took the other.

The canoes moved away from the bank and wound through the village-on-water followed by cries of greeting from several island houses and the angry barking of watchdogs. Because in the depth of winter the water was cold, the water buffalo had been left on the islands, in the cattle shelters or makeshift reed-walled pens behind some of the houses; instead of foraging for themselves, they would spend the day idly, allowing women and children to bring them canoesful of rushes cut in the marsh.

Once outside the village, our canoe led the way along a wandering channel between towering walls of reeds and growths of sedge and rushes, until even the distant voices of people gathering fodder faded into the background murmur of life in the marshes, frogs, birds, the dip of paddles, the almost silent surge of slim canoes through chilly water.

The familiar excitement welled up inside me. But with an unfamiliar edge.

Usually, as soon as the village was out of sight, I could imagine myself a time-traveler exploring a dawn world, before anyone's Empire, not yet stifled by convention and hypocrisy, and the range of human possibility would get me by the throat. Today was different. Cold, gray, windless morning sat on the marsh like the certainty of death: still no sun, the sky gray, the water gray, the world a monochrome steel engraving: you had to catch color by surprise to see it at all, leaves a dark reluctant green instead of some variant of black, the tall reeds not ash gray but yellow. Today a nameless menace underlay the excitement.

The waterway widened suddenly and we broke into a broad lagoon. Half of its surface was covered with waterfowl, which after a startled pause began to flutter and kick up spray and rise into the air. The birds were on our left, which meant an easy angle of fire for anyone right-handed. I brought the guest gun up and thumbed off the safety and fired my permitted barrel into the flock. The canoe rocked. Two coots fell into the water. Behind me my father fired twice and three more fell, one into the reedbed bordering the lagoon. I broke my gun open, fitted my second cartridge into the empty side, closed the gun and was bringing it back to my shoulder when my father said sharply, "No."

After a second I brought the gun down, watching the coots fly out of range.

"Why not?"

"Your safety-catch is off. You're in too much of a hurry. You'll learn to shoot safely or you won't shoot at all."

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"Yes, sir. Do *you* put your safety-catch on when you reload?"

"No. When you've learned your lesson and had a few years' experience you won't have to either." Then to Alwan, in Arabic, "Pick them up." The canoe glided forward. "Anyway you got your brace. Time to give the gun to Captain Carmady."

He reloaded. I unloaded, giving him back the second cartridge and dropping the used case in my pocket. Captain Stark called from behind us, "I say, you chaps, are you sure it's fair, getting two birds with one shot?"

I hoped he hadn't heard the rebuke I'd had.

I called back, "Sometimes it's hard not to."

He flashed his teeth. "I'd like to see you try. That'd be a test of skill, wouldn't it?"

Both canoes now busied themselves picking up the fallen birds. Since they were meant for our hosts' tables, not ours, the canoe boys slit each one's throat in the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, which made them lawful food for good Muslims. Alwan, who had left the canoe for the reeds into which one had fallen, was just about to step back in when Captain Stark said blankly, "Oh my God."

He was not smiling. Their canoe was now on our right, and he was looking away, slack-jawed and pale, at the biggest boar I had ever seen. It was standing in plain sight on a floating island of vegetation maybe sixty yards away, a creature of bristled malevolence, mostly massive head and shoulders and awesome tusks.

Captain Stark brought his rifle up — I hadn't realized he was left-handed — and fired quickly. I had never heard a .303 fired so close. The sound punched a brutal hole in the air and slammed painfully against my eardrums. His canoe rocked. Alwan stumbled in getting back into our canoe and it rocked. Alwan swore a lurid, anatomically detailed oath. I was vaguely aware of the metallic sounds of the .303's bolt action being worked, and that another, extraneous, unfamiliar sound was coming not from my own shocked hearing mechanism but from the pig. It had staggered; now its hindquarters sagged, and it screamed. It sat down and kept on screaming and was dragging itself to the island's edge when Captain Carmady fired a shot that caught it cleanly behind the left shoulder.

The screaming stopped. The pig fell into the water and sank.

Slowly Captain Stark laid his rifle across his knees.

"Bloody thing was as big as a mule," he said in a voice of wonder.

"You fired *left-handed*." Captain Carmady was coldly furious. "Just for the easier angle. You're not good enough. Then you had to move your hands into the conventional position to work the bolt. Hence your failure to fire a second shot. A bad blunder, Stark."

"Now see here —"

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"Not in front of the *natives*," my father said.

Captain Stark threw him a look of stony resentment. But he paused and took a breath.

"You're right." He nodded. "Ought to apologize, oughtn't I? Sorry, Carmady. Sorry, Mr. Grant. Sorry, Roger. Won't happen again."

He looked properly abashed. But then as the canoes pulled apart he threw me a sly wink. We had both been reprimanded and that made us allies.

I didn't feel like anyone's ally. Only puzzled and disappointed.

We saw no more pig that morning but my father and Captain Carmady brought down an impressive number of waterfowl, mostly coot, teal and mallard. When we got back to the village we distributed the birds among Khaldun and the canoe boys and Abbas, the shaykh's steward, who had arrived in our absence. Abbas was a smallish man with shrewd eyes and a moth-eaten short brown beard and an air of confident authority. He ushered us into the *mudhif*.

The *mudhif* was a modest one, a tubular building of nine reed arches roofed and walled with overlapping reed mats. Usually placid, today it was gloomy. What light there was came in through the entrance and the lattice-work of reeds that took up part of the wall at either end. Except where the coffee hearth was, more mats covered the floor; and there were cushions and pillows on small rugs along the sides and across the far end.

We sat and stowed the guns between the pillows and the wall. A man came in, started a fire of cane and buffalo dung, and began roasting coffee beans. Since Captain Carmady's Arabic was rudimentary and Captain Stark's nonexistent, I was kept busy translating. Abbas was loquacious in his welcome, with many politely repeated queries about their health, about their flight down from Baghdad, about the weather in Baghdad, and a dozen other inconsequentials. Captain Carmady was used to this ritual. Captain Stark was new to it. When Khaldun, Jasim's father, launched us into another round of it when Abbas was through, Captain Stark's patience cracked. The skin around his eyes got strained. He flashed his widest and most disarming smile.

"No more chatter, you old sod. Shut up and bring on the dancing girls."

I gasped. Then I had a mad impulse to translate exactly what he had said just to see what would happen. But I turned the gasp into a cough and said to Khaldun, "The Captain says he is grateful for the welcome you have given him, and says if you greet strangers like this with what great festivities must you greet old friends."

"But he is a friend of the sahib, the father of Roger, so to us he *is* a friend," Khaldun said merrily.

I put it into English.

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"How long does this go on?" Captain Stark asked.

"Quite a while," I assured him, and told Khaldun the Captain said he was much honored.

"Bear up, Stark," Captain Carmady encouraged him. He looked at me with an amused glint. "You're rather good at this, aren't you?"

"He plans a career in diplomacy," Captain Stark said. "He has a natural gift for telling barefaced lies. Don't you feel guilty, Roger, violating the hospitality of the great high mucky-muck over there by telling such whopping great fibs?"

"Yes, actually. But I can't let down the side, can I?"

He grinned. "Ah, the great dilemma: to be guided by your conscience — or your loyalties? Just remember whose side you're on."

It had never occurred to me that my conscience and my loyalties could ever conflict; and I was kept too busy translating to examine the idea. The coffee-maker pounded the fresh roasted coffee beans to a powder in a brass mortar while squatting just outside the doorway, more people of greater or lesser importance joined us in the *mudhif*, and pungent coffee was made in a big fire-blackened coffeepot with a great curving spout right out of the *Arabian Nights*.

I had no idea who all the other people were. Coffee was drunk, and in due time, only an hour and a half late, lunch was brought in and laid on the mat between the rows of people. A boy brought in a basin and water in a jug with a slender spout and a thin cake of soap and everyone washed his hands. Lunch was heaping platters of rice, bowls of buttermilk, roasted chickens, meat and vegetable stews, and fragrant sauces. There were spoons and forks in deference to the European guests. Bread came in flat circles the size of dinner plates, pliable and tasty.

Halfway through the meal rain began pattering on the mat roof over our heads. Later, when the leftovers and the dirty dishes were being removed, someone came in and said that a canoe was approaching. A minute later a young man in a good wool cloak with a long plain gray belted robe under it came through the entrance, the trailing ends of his headcloth muffling his face. He unwrapped them and draped them over the top of his head, revealing a small brown pock-marked face with laughing eyes and a cheeky grin. The grin had a crooked front tooth in the middle of it. He advanced on my father, hand extended.

"Jasim," I murmured to Captain Stark.

I had a flash of Amsha's sunlit nipple and a cold fist clenched in my chest. All oblivious, Jasim pumped my father's hand and expressed delight in seeing him and asked about everyone back in Amara, including the two dogs and the household servants. Evidently he had had no warning of my father's displeasure. So much for mind-reading. The only thing noticeably different about him was that he was better dressed than anyone present and wore a watch on his right wrist.

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Eventually he got around to me. We shook hands.

"How are you, Roger?"

"May God give you peace."

"May God protect you."

I introduced the two airmen. Captain Stark turned up the smile but looked ill at ease. I had to translate some chatter about flight and airplanes and Jasim paid due respect to the RAF and the King of England before someone made room for him to sit down across from us. He traded greetings with the other marsh men.

"Your father says you work for Shaykh Khalaf," my father told him. "How can you, when people say you're a prophet?"

Jasim looked startled. "A *prophet?*" He made a shrug of denial, palms turned up. "That is blasphemy, sahib."

I had to translate that one.

"Tell him," my father said, "that some say he's a sorcerer."

This time the shrug was bigger, the denial more emphatic. "What is this talk, sahib?"

"Tell him this, Roger: the power of a sorcerer doesn't come from God."

". . . Do I have to? I mean it sounds as though you think —"

"I brought you because you're good with the language. Tell him what I said."

So I did. Jasim was scandalized.

"*All* power comes from God, sahib."

"Even the power to do ill?"

"What ill?" Jasim scrambled to his feet. It had grown very quiet in the *mudhif* and I thought I heard the faint crackling sound of strain on the reed mat under the rug. His expression ran the short course from scandal to bafflement to simple anguish. "What is this, Roger? What ill have I done you?"

I had forgotten all about my role as detective. Jasim had entered the *mudhif* as friendly as a puppy and transparently glad to see us, and we had turned on him. It wasn't only bad manners to do this while enjoying the hospitality of someone's *mudhif*: worse, it wasn't *fair*. What had Jasim done?

"You've done me no harm," I told him. "I don't understand any of this, I'm just the interpreter."

"Ask the sahib," Jasim said in a passionate voice, "what harm I've done *him?*"

I asked. "None," my father said. "Yet. Ask him what harm he's planning."

Jasim watched my face carefully while I translated this. Then he said in an uncertain voice, "When I learn what catamite dog son of a dog filled your father's head with these lies, I'll take my knife and slit his throat."

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Then for measured seconds he stood there staring at my father, finally turning to Abbas, the shaykh's steward, as though for help. Abbas stared back blankly. Jasim looked around past me to Captain Stark then back to my father. He looked pale and bereft. His eyes glistened damply.

He turned suddenly and almost ran out into the light rain.

Abbas cleared his throat and ordered tea. As though unaware how rude he had been, my father turned to Khaldun.

"Your son seems upset today," he said solicitously. "Is he sick?"

"No, sahib." Khaldun's seamed face was masklike, unreadable. "Not sick that I know of."

"Perhaps this work he does for Shaykh Khalaf is bad for his health."

"We cannot speak of his work."

"Is it shameful, then?"

"No, God forbid! The shaykh is a man of honor. But . . . my son is young. The young are often nervous. Perhaps it's time we chose him a wife."

Everyone was talking at once now — about everything except Jasim and his work for the shaykh. Surely the villagers could not be this ignorant — or this disinterested. Then a couple of men came in carrying trays with sweet, strong, scalding tea in little potbellied glasses, and when it was served my father and Abbas began talking about the rain interfering with the afternoon pig hunt. The tea bore as much resemblance to the traditional English brew as Irish coffee does to ditch-water. I loved it. I only got to drink a single glass before my father told me to go and see how my young friend guarding the car was doing.

"And if you see Jasim, be sure to invite him to come to the pig hunt."

The rain had become a light drifting mist that ceased almost as I left the *mudhif*. Half way to the nearest houses three ill-tempered watchdogs barred my path, barking furiously until a woman emerged from one of the houses and dispersed them with a high-pitched tirade and a fiercely-brandished palm-frond broom.

The Ford stood on its knoll next to the disconsolate palm trees, loosely surrounded by mat-roofed houses, reed buffalo shelters, the mud-walled cattle pen. No sign of Hamad. An occasional voice came from one of the houses.

Down the bank and across the water, fog had come sifting through the reed barricades, surrounding the houses until they were only vague outlines, patches of darkness in the almost luminous silver-gray which ended abruptly a few yards from the bank.

In the fog a small canoe materialized softly. A draped figure, standing almost amidships above an inconstant reflection as featureless as a shadow, poled the canoe slowly with a twenty-foot-long reed. For no special reason I wondered, with a stab of jealousy, whether old Khaldun

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would arrange for Jasim to marry his orphan cousin Amsha. She would be old enough soon if she wasn't already

The canoe changed direction, emerged from the fog, neared the bank.

An almost familiar voice said, "Roger?"

My knees went rubbery. The voice was already deeper than when I had last heard it, at Easter, with a new vibrancy that evoked a buzzing from my spinal cord.

". . . Amsha? I didn't recognize you in the fog."

The canoe came up to the bank and touched bottom. She remained standing, holding the long reed angled into the water. She wore a thin, black *abaya* pulled up over her head, making her seem shapeless; under it a black headdress that wrapped around her neck and shoulders like a shawl hiding the top of a rose-colored cotton dress that swept down to her ankles. Not a child any more. Her face, in that wet air against the background of silver fog, was extraordinarily vivid: still Amsha's face but not just pretty any more; it was breathtaking: golden skin, bold black eyebrows, wide dark Arab eyes, a neat nose, and softly sculptured lips. I was devastated. I even forgot about her breasts.

"Jasim wants to talk to you."

"Where is he?"

"Get in. I'll take you to him."

She steadied the canoe with the long reed while I climbed over the prow and settled onto the floorboards. Only there weren't any floorboards. This was the economy model. I sat on wooden ribs, trying to look as accustomed and casual as the marsh people but mostly just watching Amsha as she lifted the reed from the water and used it to push off from the bank. In seconds we entered the fog, and for a few contented minutes glided through a frosted world where the shadowy landscape of a Sumerian marsh village drifted by on either side and time had no meaning, and only the canoe and ourselves were substantial.

We had passed what I thought was the last house when another loomed out of the fog. It was small, with no buffalo shelter behind it. When Amsha guided the canoe up to the artificial island it was built on I thought I saw even in the fog a gleam of newness in the roof matting and the columns of bundled reeds framing the doorway. Jasim must have been watching for us. He emerged from the house without a word, gripped the prow of the canoe, hauled it a little way onto the island, holding it steady while I got out. Amsha shipped the pole and followed me.

Jasim wasn't smiling. Jasim not smiling was almost a contradiction in terms.

"Why, Roger?"

"Why what?"

"Ask your father."

"Ask him what?"

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"Why he is spying on us."

"All right," I said dubiously. "I didn't know he was. Did you learn about it listening to his mind?"

He gave me an intense look then shrugged briefly. "How else would I know it?" He gestured me toward the house. Amsha had already disappeared inside. We followed.

The reed house seemed small and cramped after the *mudhif*. A dung fire glowed in the coffee hearth and a kerosene lamp turned low gave a weary light to the back of the house where the cooking things were and where Amsha was crouched familiarly, examining the supplies.

"Do you want to eat?" she asked.

"No, the shaykh fed me. Will you eat, Roger?"

"I am well fed, praise to God."

"We'll drink tea." Abruptly he waved me to a seat on the rug beside the hearth. The rug had spent much time on some other floor. It was threadbare wool, mostly red and blue, though the march of the years had blurred the pattern. There were a couple of gaudy new cushions to lean against. A china teapot with a chipped spout snuggled up to the fire to draw the last ounce of strength and flavor from the tea leaves. Two potbellied glasses, with big crystals of sugar already spooned into them, sat on china saucers beside cheap spoons not much bigger than doll's house miniatures. "Who told you I could hear thoughts?"

"My father and the two airmen, yesterday. And then today in Saidiyya, a boy named Hamad."

"He's a brainless noise-maker; he knows he's not supposed to talk about it. I'll break his head."

He sounded coldly capable of it. He picked up the teapot and filled both glasses. I glanced toward the rear of the house. Amsha sat quietly on the floor, cross-legged, her hands in her lap. She had dropped the *abaya* from her head to her shoulders and had it drawn about her. Even in the meagre light her face was unbelievable. My mind squeaked to a stop. I felt as though something were trying to draw my lungs out through my breastbone. Not long ago when we were kids together she would have sat with us, but we were no longer kids. At least they weren't. Jasim and I were engaged in men's affairs, and women sat apart.

I felt disoriented and inadequate.

"Who are those airmen?"

"The older one is a friend of my father's from the war with the Turks."

"And the younger one, the pretty one? Is he someone's wife? Don't tell me he came to Saidiyya to shoot pig."

He handed me a steaming glass of tea.

"To shoot pig," I said, stirring the tea with the tiny spoon, "and to learn about Jasim ibn Khaldun."

"They've heard about me in *Baghdad*?"

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"Apparently." I thought he'd be proud. He wasn't.

"Some clown forgot to keep his mouth shut. Shaykh Khalaf won't like it." He beckoned to Amsha. "Bring a glass and have tea with us, Amsha."

She rose fluidly, refused the tea but joined us, sinking to the reed mat a couple of feet away. I passionately wished Jasim elsewhere. At the same time I was glad he was here to keep me from making a fool of myself.

Holding his glass at the rim by thumb and forefinger, Jasim sipped noisily.

"I will tell you, Roger," he said at least, "because we were children together. Listening to men's thoughts is the work I do for Shaykh Khalaf. I help him solve disputes and mete out justice. I protect him from dishonest servants and dishonest businessmen. Naturally he doesn't want this known. I'm useful; he doesn't want me shot or stabbed and thrown into some dark corner of the marsh."

I said carefully, "You must have great influence and authority."

He made a violent gesture. "How could I have? I'm a marsh villager. I know fishing and making things from reeds, raising buffalo, working in the grain fields. Because I can tell what a man is thinking I have a wrist watch and new clothes and money to live on. What do I know of influence and authority? — Do you know why I live here outside the village?"

He said it like a challenge. I glanced at Amsha. She met my eyes for measured seconds, then looked at Jasim. It would be awful if she were already in love with him. I looked at him too and shook my head. He was pale around the mouth. I had not seen the open grin with the crooked front tooth since I got here. He looked older. The tension in his body hummed with bitterness and anger.

"I live here," he said in a strained voice, "because my family and friends don't want me near hearing their secret thoughts and dreams and lustings. As though I enjoyed hearing them." His lip curled.

I glanced at Amsha again, found her watching me closely.

I said to Jasim, "Amsha doesn't seem to mind."

"I've known all her thoughts since she was a baby. Why should she mind now?" Amsha didn't react to this. Jasim finally smiled, but it was a small weary equivocal smile that hardly showed his teeth. He gave me a long look, shook his head slowly. "Our friend doesn't believe me, Amsha. I live in exile because of this curse, but he doesn't believe me."

"Believe him," Amsha said.

I picked up my tea glass by the rim and took a sip. You had to drink it at a temperature just below anguish; once it cooled it was cloying and unpleasant.

"All this morning I didn't know whether to believe you or not." I put the glass down in the saucer at my feet. "Sometimes I almost did and it scared me. This hearing you do is supposed to be impossible."

He sighed.

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"When I was a child, Roger, I thought everyone heard these voices I heard and saw the images I saw behind my eyes. I learned not to talk about them because nobody knew what I was talking *about*. Then for some years they became faint enough for me to ignore, until I began changing from a child to a man. Then they came back, stronger, and now I recognized them. I was being stimulated by other people's lecheries, and galled by their envies and jealousies, and made hungry by their wants. That's when I came to work in your house and had to get used to the thoughts of a Christian English family. Your mother took me for a halfwit. — Do you know what it's like, most of the time, hearing thoughts? It's like going into a roomful of people all talking at once and trying to separate the voices to hear what's being said."

"Can you hear thoughts in English? You must, if that's how you learned my father is spying on you."

"People don't think only in words. Sometimes it's pictures. Sometimes I don't get either; I get . . . impressions."

"How do you know they're correct?"

"I know."

He clearly believed it. It was embarrassing to realize how close I'd come to believing it too, earlier.

But supposing —?

Jasim drained his glass, threw Amsha a crooked half-smile.

He said in an ironic voice, "He likes your tits."

Four words in translation, only two in Arabic. For very long seconds in which the world got terribly quiet I couldn't believe he'd said them. When the regretful realization that he had settled on me like a clammy fog, my gut froze, my face burned, the floor disappeared, and I was pitched into space, disoriented and alone, as in a nightmare of falling. I had been reaching for my glass but my hand became a misguided flail that knocked it spinning but not over, the spoon rattling.

Jasim caught my wrist before the flail did real damage. The floor re-formed under me. I would have preferred to go on falling through the void. Jasim's hand was dry-skinned, sinewy, hard as nails. His eyes were bright and unsympathetic. He spoke to Amsha without looking at her.

"He's afraid you're going to marry me because he wants you for himself." He held onto my wrist long enough to make me feel like a prisoner. Then he let go. "Wait for your beard to grow, Roger. Even then, will your father permit it?"

"No."

"Because he is a high Englishman, and we are poor Arabs?"

"Yes." For other reasons too, but that was the main one.

"What will you do then? Try to make her your whore?"

This was getting nasty. It was what I got for wading into grownup waters. Suddenly my innards felt loose and quivery. I came within a hair

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of trying a bluff, of adopting a posture of outraged dignity and accusing Jasim of making scandalous accusations without concern for his cousin's modesty. I didn't because it would have sounded too much like my father, wouldn't have been honest, and wouldn't have fooled Jasim for one second.

"What is this talk, Jasim?" I sounded too much like a scared kid but I plowed on. "Such a thing would be as shameful to my people as yours."

I sat as still as I could and tried to appear calm. Time slid by. He studied me bleakly. Then — fractionally — he seemed to relent.

"Yes," he said. "You want — but you also want to be honorable. Perhaps because your beard has not grown."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not." I had avoided looking at Amsha. I steeled myself and risked it. Her face was grave, unreadable. "Was that an example of why the village exiled him?"

"Sometimes he gets angry, Roger."

"Explain to your father," Jasim said abruptly. "Ask why he spies on us."

"Of course." I picked up my glass and downed the remaining tea. It had cooled suddenly and tasted awful. "He says you should join him for the pig hunt."

"If the fog doesn't lift there won't be a pig hunt. Take him back, Amsha."

He wasn't going to offer me more tea. A serious failing in a host. Either he was being insulting or was badly disturbed about something.

The ride back was miserable. For me, anyway. I sat in the prow facing aft to watch Amsha pole the canoe through the fog with calm, economical movements. Now that I wasn't scared I writhed with embarrassment. Of course I didn't have to face her: I could turn the other way and ride in true marsh style; but not being able to see her would be worse. Futile longings clamored under my ribs, and my mind kept falling over itself asking questions. I felt Jasim had betrayed me and that, in some way, my father had tricked me. Into doing what I didn't know. I was very much a kid then, lost and disheartened; and Amsha was mysteriously and unreachably a woman.

A cold breeze had sprung up. The fog began to shred and dissipate. By the time we reached that part of the village where the Ford was parked the day had regained the gunmetal clarity of this morning. I craned my neck and saw a small knot of people standing outside the *mudhif* while my father and Captain Carmady and Captain Stark strolled toward the car. Hamad was on duty again, sitting on the running board.

I turned back to watch Amsha and met her disturbing level-eyed gaze.

"What will you tell your father?"

I shrugged. "Everything." Then boldly, forcing a grin, "Well, almost

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everything."

Her eyes warmed. She almost smiled.

"You know he speaks of you as a friend."

"When I speak to my father, I'll speak as Jasim's friend."

Under her guidance the canoe changed direction. Her voice was practical. "I think that will be difficult for you. Will you hunt pig with them?"

"I don't think they'll take me."

The canoe nudged the bank. I had the horrible conviction that I would get out and she would pole the canoe away and I wouldn't see her for months. I fumbled for something to say and came up empty. Turning, I stood up and stepped onto dry land and found I was looking at Captain Stark, who stood a few yards away, his hands in his pockets, smiling brilliantly over my shoulder at Amsha.

I had a moment of hideous indecision before deciding to say nothing. I turned to push the canoe from the bank. Amsha was looking back at Captain Stark and her face couldn't have been more impassive if he'd been a lump of mud. I grinned and told her to go with God. Without my weight on it, the prow had floated clear. Amsha leaned on her pole and the canoe glided away.

Captain Stark gave me a sly grin and we started walking to the car.

"Roger, you young rogue! Keeping her all to yourself?"

My father said abruptly, "Where've you been?"

"Talking to Jasim — sir."

My father and Captain Carmady exchanged glances. Captain Carmady dug into his pockets and produced his tobacco pouch and began stuffing his pipe. Hamad had wandered off again.

"What about?" my father snapped.

"The work he does for Shaykh Khalaf, which is mind-reading. It's supposed to be a secret, more or less, but his mind-reading is why the villagers make him live away from everyone else."

My father hooted quietly.

"And you fell for this line?"

"He seems to be rather well paid, sir. And he wants to know why you're spying on them. I don't know if he means on the village or the whole tribe."

My father's face grew very still behind his dark mustache. He gave me a hard stare that lasted several seconds. Then he looked at Captain Carmady, whose hand with the short briar seemed frozen inside the tobacco pouch. Captain Carmady shrugged so faintly I wasn't sure he had actually moved at all.

Captain Stark murmured, looking at me, "Has someone been carrying tales out of school?"

"Oh for God's sake," my father said. "He knows nothing to carry tales about."

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"But Jasim does, doesn't he?" I said. "He plucked it right out of your mind. Why are we spying on our friends?"

"These people aren't our friends. Friendships exist between equals. These people are ignorant, illiterate natives. Did Jasim actually convince you he could read minds?" I nodded. "How?"

I hesitated. "He read mine."

"What did he read?"

". . . I'd rather not say."

"I'm *ordering* you to say."

I hesitated again. Shook my head.

Captain Stark grinned. "Something about that cheeky little Arab bint, wasn't it? Come on, Roger. Stop being obstructive. You want to be known as a good soldier, don't you? Be mentioned in despatches?"

"I'm not in the army, Captain Stark. And I'm not a spy." They'd called it being a detective because spying was sneaky and underhanded. But spying was what they'd meant.

"If they catch you interfering with one of their young ladies," Captain Stark went on delicately, "d'you know what these so-called friends of yours will cut off with a rusty knife?"

I felt myself being pushed headlong into the tide of rebellion that had swept me into trouble last night.

"Would they? Don't you think they'd be afraid you'd fly over in your Bristol fighter and machinegun the whole village? They're already wondering about you, you know."

Which stopped him. Blank surprise killed the twinkle in his eyes.

Captain Carmady scraped a match across the striking surface of a matchbox. The match flared.

"Actually," he said mildly, shielding the match from the wind, "they'd be more likely to kill the young lady for dishonoring them. They're quite unforgiving, you know, about their women. Puritanical. Roger knows that." He applied the flame to his pipe and sucked it down into the tobacco. "But isn't there something we're forgetting?"

He got the pipe going, let the match go out and dropped it at his feet. He lowered his bony frame onto the Ford's runningboard and stuck his legs out and crossed his ankles. He looked at me.

"You're British. That's why the thought of sneaking around spying goes against the grain. Why the thought of your dad's involvement in that sort of thing does too. Well, I think it does you credit.

"But that's not really the sort of thing that's going on. I mean these chaps don't have a secret weapon we're trying to discover the plans for, or big armies the Chief of the Imperial General Staff wants to know the disposition of, or anything like that. We're not *against* them, you see. We're just keeping an eye on things. On the lookout for signs of trouble, evidence of foreign agitators or bad hats with big ambitions, the kind

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who'd like to see the Monarchy fall — or who'd like to see *us* kicked out of the country. We wouldn't want that to happen. After all, the country's an important part of our line of comunication with India, it's important to the defense of India, and I daresay it'd be important to the defense of the Suez Canal if there were another Great War. So we're not pretending we're not doing this for our own benefit, because we are, of course; but we're not doing it *selfishly*, d'you see, it's not just for our own good but for their good too. They may be independent but they do need our help, you know."

He tapped the bit of his pipe against his tobacco-stained lower teeth. The wind whipped pale shreds of smoke from the top of the bowl and spun them into oblivion. He reached out the thumb of the hand holding the pipe and scratched the side of his nose, looking at me anxiously, earnestly.

Of course, Iraq seemed a long way from India to be a part of its defenses, but I did have some sense of how long the lines of Imperial communication were. I felt an upwelling of gratitude toward this awkward lean brown man. He had not only shored up my patriotism, he had actually spoken to me as though I were a human being.

"Why didn't someone explain this to me before?"

"I suppose because we were in the habit of thinking of you as still a kid. Now what was that you said before, about the villagers wondering about Jim here?"

Even though he had pointed with his eyes and his pipestem, it took me a second to realize that Jim was Captain Stark. In that time and place, the use of a given name was a startling informality, at least to a boy my age. With a leap of pride I realized that I had been accorded a significant promotion, and only half a heartbeat later that it was unlikely, it was too much, Captain Carmady had tried to flatter me, clearly thought me enough of a kid to be gullible. Which made me mistrust him.

Disappointment stole my tongue for a moment.

Then I said stiffly, "Not everyone's wondering. Just Jasim, though I don't know how many people he may have told."

"What's he wondering about?"

"He doesn't think Captain Stark came to Saidiyya just to hunt pig."

"Oh, for God's sake!" my father said irritably. "What does he think he came for then?"

"He didn't say."

"I really did, you know," Captain Stark said. "Of course I was quite keen on finding out about your Jasim chap, but all this cloak-and-dagger stuff is very much news to me."

"It's not cloak-and-dagger," my father snapped. "Don't put ideas into the boy's head."

"Oh, is he a boy again? And I suppose it's all right for him to tell Jasim

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he was right, there *is* spying going on, but it's all for their own good?"

My father made a strangled sound. Captain Carmady looked startled.

"Afraid I've saddled you with grownup responsibilities, young Roger," he said. "Official secrets and all that. Not one word of this, to Jasim or anyone."

"He'll fish it out of my head anyway," I said.

"He must have worked some sort of trick to convince you he could do that. Because it simply can't be done." He turned to my father. "Jasim's not clever enough to have worked out something like this on his own, is he?"

"Of course not."

"Then we'll have to find out who's behind him — and what he's up to." Captain Carmady turned back to me as though about to suggest something.

"If it simply can't be done," I said doggedly, "then how did Jasim know about the spying?"

"Well, it's not really spying, is it?"

"Then why can't I explain it to him?"

"The fewer people who know about it the better, don't you see? It's so easy to misinterpret."

"Someone's already done that, haven't they?"

He made tiny aimless sucking motions on the bit of his pipe and gave me a thoughtful stare.

"Question is," Captain Stark said cheerfully, "who told 'em anything to misinterpret?"

"Damn it, this is serious," my father grumbled.

"Oh, absolutely! Question is, what are we going to do about it?"

Captain Carmady put his hands on his knees and pushed himself up off the running board as though winter had invaded his joints. He pointed toward the *mudhif*. A delegation was approaching us.

"I think we're going to hunt pig." Something out on the water caught his eye. "Isn't that Jasim?"

Jasim was sitting in the stern of a long, high-prowed canoe, paddling toward the bank. It was not the canoe Amsha and I had used. When it nudged into the mud he shipped his paddle and climbed out, pausing to lift something from the floorboards.

"No medal for you this mission, Roger, old boy," Captain Stark grinned. "You didn't tell us he had a gun."

"In the marshes," my father growled, "everyone has a gun who can afford one."

But not every marshman who owned a gun could afford much ammunition, especially of the kind needed to hunt boar. Jasim had brought a pocketful of buckshot cartridges for his single-barreled BSA 12-bore; my

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father supplemented them with a couple of his special ball cartridges, for which Jasim thanked him curtly, his face strained. I remembered what he had said about singling out one voice in a crowded room. Abbas, the shaykh's steward, had produced a stubby Mauser rifle, so the party wasn't short of fire power. My father had done his best to discourage the small army of sightseeing villagers always eager to tag along and watch the fun. Three canoes carrying hunters, paddle men, and a couple of privileged or especially knowledgeable oldsters, pushed enthusiastically from the bank, quickly disappearing into the maze of the reeds.

The day had left me almost too irritated and resentful to envy the hunters. Our guest gun was locked up in the Ford.

The others left behind began to wander off. Khaldun, Jasim's father, wasn't one of the privileged. He gave me a wry grin.

"Eh, my son. They say that you are too young to hunt pig — and that I am too old."

"My father says I'm too young," I agreed, "but no man dares to say you're too old."

His eyes disappeared into their nests of wrinkles.

"No man, maybe; but my bones say it. What do your bones say?"

"That I'm strong as a young lion."

He made approving noises, insisting that I would soon be the father of young lion cubs, and suggested that we adjourn to his house, where I could tell him about Egypt where I went to school: did they have marshes there?

I said impulsively, "Jasim explained about his hearing thoughts."

His eyebrows pulled together.

"It's not a secret any more," I went on. "They know about him in Baghdad."

He gave a long sigh. "God is kind."

"Wasn't it cruel to make Jasim move outside the village?"

"My son, we couldn't have him spying on the thoughts of women! In the day it's one thing, where everyone's mind is on practical things. At night it's different."

I didn't know how valid the distinction was but I nodded sagely. "Of course." Khaldun had no more trouble accepting telepathy then we foreigners had rejecting it. To him, the evident was obviously possible; to us it was impossible *a priori*, so the evident had to be sham. Shouldn't I be looking for evidence that it *wasn't* — evidence that might convince my father and Captain Carmady? I might even prove that their worries were groundless. . . .

I had a wistful memory of yesterday at tea-time when I had imagined myself deftly picking the villagers' brains without their knowledge. I was a lot older now. I resigned myself to another bout of polite conversation with Khaldun, which I would try to steer toward Jasim's talent.

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I tried, when we got to Khaldun's house. It was old, for a reed house: the roof sagged; the bundled reed arches and the matting were smoke-darkened and smelled of smoke and memories of cooking. Khaldun simply said he was forbidden to speak of Jasim's talent; and when I grinned and asked him temptingly who would know, he said, "Jasim," and made me feel inept and guilty, an unworthy guest. I badly wanted to make amends.

There was movement in the doorway. I looked up. Amsha stood there.

"Hamad told me I'd find you here. Come with me for a canoe ride."

I forgot about making amends. But I could still be polite.

"I'm your uncle's guest, Amsha. If he gives his permission . . . ?"

Khaldun's face was suddenly cranky and forbidding.

"Haven't you got work to do, girl?"

"Jasim's work. That's why I need the sahib's son."

Impatience gave her a bewildering authority. Khaldun's expression settled into sullen incomprehension.

"And you, son of the sahib: you wish to go?"

I said with his permission. Grumpily he told me to go and enjoy myself. I scrambled to my feet and ducked out of the doorway and he called after us not to go near the hunters.

Amsha strode as though driven, and I hurried after her to the bank below the Ford where the little canoe was waiting. Wind ruffled the surface of the water. A flock of wildfowl rose suddenly above distant reedbeds and from somewhere came the sound of rifle shots.

We listened for more. But the wind had snatched the sounds away and it was hard to be certain what direction they had come from. Amsha shook her head and held the canoe's prow and gestured me aboard.

I climbed in and sat. She pushed off and stepped aboard in one movement. No pole this time. She settled herself and picked up a paddle, then took the canoe straight through the narrow waist of the village and into the reeds beyond. A couple of herons and a lonely pelican flapped into the sky.

The tall pale barricades enclosed us. The reeds made a loud, dry, chitinous rustle in the wind as we wound along a twisting waterway. Amsha's lips were set and pale. She wouldn't look at me.

Against I felt lost and alone amid incomprehensible hostilities.

Abruptly she shipped the paddle. The canoe drifted to a stop against a floating island. Her hands grappled in her lap. Then her face came up and she searched my face with great questing eyes, doubting eyes. Then her shoulders moved and she flashed a look at the lead-gray sky and her hands came apart in a random gesture. She was being driven but not by impatience. By anxiety.

". . . I'm supposed to find things out from you."

"I'm supposed to find things out from all of you," I told her. "So our

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people want us to be spies. But why you, when he can hear thoughts?" And sometimes see them, of course. He'd seen Amsha's right breast, coral-nippled, sunlit, captivating me in memory. Just knowing that behind the folds of the black *abaya* and the shawl, under the rose-colored dress, it nestled softly by its twin, dried my mouth and clotted my mind.

She shook her head distractedly.

"You heard him say it: the hearing is like going into a noisy room full of people and trying to pick out just one voice. With strangers it's hardest. He has to . . . withdraw, be silent with himself. With people he knows it's easier. He's been listening to my thoughts all my life. He's so familiar with the pathways of my mind he knows what I'm thinking almost before I do. If I dream at night he knows what about. If I'm hungry or thirsty or have to pee, he knows. I can't be alone with my soul."

"How can you live like that?"

She made a pacific gesture.

"I'm his cousin and his friend. I don't avoid him, I cook for him, he trusts me. But I can't fail to do what he orders, or do anything he doesn't want me to. . . ."

"Then you're his slave!"

"If that's what I am, I accept it. I'm resigned. Only when he listens to my mind and finds there acceptance and resignation will he continue to trust me. Only while he trusts me can I be valuable to him."

"Don't you want to be free of him?"

"As long as he needs me he protects me. The villagers are afraid of him, and of me because I'm his friend; who knows what secrets he might have told me? If he stopped protecting me —"

"Perhaps my mother would give you work as her maid —"

"Roger, Roger, don't make it hard! This is my lot, I accept it, you must accept it too."

She started to reach out and touch me but recoiled. After a moment she picked up the paddle.

"The wind is cold along the waterways."

The canoe had drifted away from the island, which was small, no more than five yards across. We paddled slowly around it, listening to make sure no wild pig lived on it; then Amsha maneuvered the canoe head-on and drove it through reeds and underbrush until the prow struck the solid mass of the floating island itself, layers of vegetation loosely anchored to the bottom of the marsh by a tangle of roots.

The canoe was wedged too tightly to drift off. We climbed out. A couple of yards away a bare spot free of brambles was partly sheltered from the wind by a thick stand of reeds. Amsha sat down with her usual unthinking grace and composed the black *abaya* around her.

I sat too. We had often shared a patch of ground together, but for the first time I felt awkward. I imagined Captain Stark flashing an equivocal

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smile. He had said, "Remember whose side you're on," which now seemed like an invocation to dead gods.

Amsha said, "Will you tell me what you told your father and those airmen?"

"That it's true, Jasim can hear thoughts. They didn't believe me."

"Are they spying on us?"

"Yes. They're afraid of someone becoming influential in the marshes and turning against the government, or the position of the English."

"So they're afraid of *Jasim?*"

"They think someone is using him. They don't know who, but they say the hearing is a trick Jasim isn't smart enough to have figured out for himself, so some criminal must have taught it to him."

"What are they going to do?"

". . . My father wants to discredit Jasim among the Bani Sukhair."

"That's all?"

"And they say they're not doing anything against the Bani Sukhair, only trying to prevent trouble, perhaps created by foreigners."

"What foreigners do we see but the English?"

"Truly, by God."

". . . Do you think your father's friends might . . . do something bad?"

"No, never. What could they do?"

She seemed to be weighing that answer. Almost furtively the tip of her tongue came out and ran across her lips.

"There must be more, Roger. Remember more."

I tried to, mentally running through the conversations I'd had, the exchanges I'd overheard.

"There is no more," I said at last.

Disappointment crumpled her face. Fear crawled out of her eyes like worms.

She looked down and said in a low shamed voice, "Jasim said if you like my tits I should show you something you'll like more, if you remember and tell enough."

It took me a while to believe I'd heard right. Then I just sat there staring. I think my heart stopped. When it began again its pounding shook my frame and must have been audible yards away. I closed my eyes. My face got hot. I had a vision of Amsha not moving from where she sat and opening her black *abaya* and raising the rose dress up past her hips. I opened my eyes fast. She huddled with the rose dress still hugging her ankles. Which it needn't do much longer. Amsha was within reach under a layer or two of unresisting cloth, with no one to interrupt or even wonder, no one to know —

Except, eventually, Jasim. There could be no secrets from Jasim, who could with demoralizing ease pinpoint a vulnerability and set up its demeaning temptation, and who seemed to think I could be coaxed

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through Amsha's degradation. No wonder she was afraid: afraid of *me*.

A wave of anger rose from my gut and clogged my brain. When I found my voice and said what I had to say I didn't know if it was out of concern for Amsha or because it was the truth or to avoid earning Jasim's contempt, an uncertainty that made me unsure I even knew myself.

From somewhere came a volley of shots followed by a burst of excited babble. It all sounded a long way off.

I said shakily, "I've told you everything I know. What is Jasim, a cousin or a pimp? He's supposed to protect your honor, not try to sell it."

Her face came up.

"He's not a pimp! — he's desperate!" Her eyes were hot; the skin across the bridge of her nose was pulled tight and pale and there were red patches on her cheeks. I felt dull disappointment. Her quick defense of Jasim meant that he was marsh and I was town, and a foreigner besides. He was kin, too, and I could never be anything. I was adrift between her people and mine and didn't really belong anywhere. "You have to understand —"

"I understand that he made me a disgraceful offer."

"*I* made the offer."

"Only because he ordered you to and would have known if you had disobeyed."

She said in anguish, "But he thinks one of the English wants to kill him!"

A few hours ago I would have dismissed the possibility out of hand. What I eventually said, in a halfwit's voice, was, "Which one?"

"He doesn't know."

"Why did he go on the pig hunt with them?"

"To show he wasn't afraid. To try to learn which one it is and expose him. He said he'd be safe in a crowd."

Which one. . . .

Captain Carmady: calm, reassuring, upholder of traditional values, devoted servant of the Crown. Captain Stark: just arrived from India, ignorant of all the cloak-and-dagger stuff, or so he said. My *father*? . . . We had bitter disagreements but I couldn't see him as a murderer. Or would he see it as a soldierly act, a patriotic duty, an extension of what the spying was all about? Did *we* go in for political assassinations? Weren't they the kind of thing that happened in the Balkans, or South America?

And suppose Jasim was *wrong* this time. Wasn't it possible that *he* might do something foolish?

I stood up. "We'll warn them. We'll tell the English what Jasim suspects and make sure nothing bad happens to anyone. If we can find them, that is."

"Hamad told me the direction they were taking."

She stood up and we returned to the canoe. The wind had died. Beyond

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the canoe a narrow stretch of water ended in a silver wall of fog in which a few reeds showed in silhouette. Amsha gripped my wrist, holding me back. Something swam out of the fog. Something small. I though it might be an otter. A second later I made out the bristled snout of a pig. I stopped breathing. The pig swam past the canoe, then turned toward our island and began clambering out of the water. Through the reeds we saw its head swing toward us. It was a tusked boar almost as big as the one I'd seen that morning.

Amsha let go of my wrist. Without words we grabbed the canoe and shoved and threw ourselves bodily into it with me lying on top of Amsha's legs. The canoe scraped through the reeds and brush at the island's edge and rocked crazily into open water. Wild pigs sometimes threw themselves onto canoes and capsized them and savaged the passengers. I couldn't see this pig, couldn't even hear it for the obscene pounding of my heart and the cataract rush of my bloodstream: it could have been up to anything. Before the canoe had stabilized I was on my knees: I grabbed the paddle, dipped it into the water, pulled desperately. The canoe rocked some more and water slopped over the side.

Three paddle strokes and the fog closed in around us. I shipped the paddle. The canoe slowed till it was hard to tell if it moved at all. Amsha, who had been face down on the canoe's ribs, sat up, her back toward me, and for a while we just waited for time to resume. The steamhammer in my ribcage subsided. The pig behind us became audible, making discontented noises and blundering about. . . .

Amsha reached back for the paddle. I doubted she could even find her way back to the village, much less the hunting party; but I put the paddle into her hand and she began to move us slowly and silently through the fog.

It wasn't the magic silver fog she had taken me through to visit Jasim. It was later in the day, darker, cold. Not the expected cold of midwinter but the cold that splinters bone. Who knew what lurked behind the shadowy reeds? I yelled in English and Arabic, warning the hunters to hold their fire for safety's sake; but we heard no answer. Nothing but the background rustle of the marsh, and the sound of droplets falling from Amsha's paddle. I was alone with her in the marsh, but instead of an idyl it was a wrenching anxiety.

We encountered brief pockets of fair visibility, moved through them into the fog again. In a while we came to the thickest fog yet. Amsha stopped paddling and we drifted.

A mutter of voices came out of the fog, but a fitful breeze had started to come up and it was hard to gauge distance or direction. I yelled.

Someone yelled back, "Who's that?"

"The sahib's son and Amsha."

A nearer voice snapped, "Shut up, over there."

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"Jasim?" Amsha asked.

The wind gusted, the fog cleared — enough. Forty yards away, at the edge of visibility, I could just see Jasim with Captain Stark behind him. Jasim brought his shotgun to his shoulder. Captain Stark raised his rifle but not to firing position. He stabbed the butt to the back of Jasim's neck and he went down like a suit of clothes dropped off a hanger.

Then Captain Stark retreated into the fog and two pigs ran into view. One charged after Stark, the other began slashing at Jasim on the ground with scimitar tusks.

I lived through those shocked few seconds remotely, as though at second hand, anesthetized. This ended in a sudden leap of elation. Jasim would not marry Amsha because Jasim was dead!

I was instantly appalled. Amsha called Jasim's name and a single rifle shot slammed out of the fog. The charging pig died on its feet. Amsha's voice disappeared in a shuddering gasp. A rifle bolt slid back, crashed home.

"My God, man!" my father shouted from beyond the gray shapes of willow and tamarisk. "The *kids* are out there in that fog!"

Captain Stark said almost casually, "Sorry to upset you, not much choice. There's another of the brutes around somewhere, I can hear it." Pause. "Jasim?" Establishing that he thought Jasim still alive.

At that point Amsha recovered her voice and let out a keening wail and began rocking back and forth. Another rifle shot. The boar disguising the clubbing murder gave a coughing grunt, an enraged squeal. A third shot dropped it.

Then the only sound was Amsha's wailing. I took the paddle from her and began paddling uncertainly toward the bank, and men began appearing out of the fog. A crashing about began in nearby reeds. There were shouts of alarm and warning. Several pigs ran into view. Guns went off. One huge boar ran straight for the water. It was chest deep and heading for our canoe when my father put an elephant ball through the back of its skull.

And suddenly the world was very quiet, dripping, the color of ashes, and the air smelled of blood. I steered clumsily around the half-floating body of the pig. Brown hands gripped the canoe.

I looked up at my father.

"You bloody little fool," he said furiously. "Who told you you could leave the village?"

The brown hands helped me out of the canoe and onto land. My legs were wet string and my knees were jelly. I turned toward Amsha but my father grabed my shoulder painfully and marched me past the shocked villagers gathered around Jasim's body, past Captain Carmady, who looked grim, and Captain Stark, who looked pale and pure, like a

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Medieval saint, to a thin line of tamarisk and willows. I think he wanted to spare me the sight of Jasim's blood. He kept on chewing me out. I didn't listen.

I felt my world was shredding. I was unnerved by what I had seen, shaken by the stranger within me who could experience that barbaric thrill of triumph, demoralized by my father's anger, cold and damp and frightened, morally compromised, and totally unready to take on the grownup world. By accusing Captain Stark I'd be doing just that. Bulldog Drummond in the Sumerian Marshes was only thirteen-year-old Roger Grant trying to find out who he was. Who he was was ready to crawl back into the cradle. Almost ready to forget Amsha's breasts.

A light rain began falling.

We were on a narrow low-lying island in a small lake. Not a floating island but a dry-land one with trees and shrubs, and a thick stand of reeds at one end. The pigs had been lying up among the reeds when the hunters had landed to wait for the fog to lift. . . .

Down near the water the knot of people began to dissipate. Captain Carmady and Captain Stark stood up. Someone had wrapped Jasim's body in a brown cloak.

The two officers came toward us. My father leaned his shotgun against a willow.

"Poor devil," Captain Stark said. He was obviously shaken but bore adversity like a prince. His stiff upper lip was faintly ostentatious. "Of course I couldn't see a thing. He couldn't either, obviously. Never had a chance to fire at the beast that killed him."

They parked their rifles beside the shotgun. Captain Carmady clamped his teeth on the bit of his pipe with the bowl upside down. He struck a match and sucked the flame upward. "Ghastly business." He glanced at me. "You youngsters gave us quite a turn, you know."

I ignored him. My innards were quivery and my knees were weak. My voice sounded bodiless and sickly.

"Is that what you do for excitement, Captain Stark? Kill people?"

After a second he looked faintly startled.

". . . What?"

"Is murder your idea of fun? What you came to the marshes for?"

I thought my father was going to hit me. The pipe with the upside down bowl sagged in Captain Carmady's jaws and made him look wearily disreputable. Captain Stark laughed awkwardly.

"Of course not, you silly ass. Hasn't anyone told him what happened? You couldn't see, of course. What happened was we'd come ashore to wait for the fog to lift. We didn't know there was a herd of pig lying up in those reeds over there. Jasim and I went to reconnoiter the immediate surroundings and got separated in the fog."

"He knew someone wanted to kill him," I said, "but not who. I

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supposed he thought he'd be safe, with everyone so near —"

"Dry up and listen, will you? I'm telling you what happened . . ."

"I saw what happened. So did Amsha. You both saw the pigs, and Jasim raised his gun, and you hit him on the back of the neck with the butt of your rifle."

Captain Carmady looked disbelieving. My father just looked old and bone-weary. He shook his head and started to speak but Captain Stark chuckled and grinned broadly.

"Why, you infernal little liar! . . . What is all this? A diversionary tactic? — best defense is attack and all that? Are you hiding something?" He grew confidential. "Come on, Roger. What were you and that girl really doing out in the marsh? Playing doctor? Did you get to explore all those interesting places up under her dress?"

Unexpectedly, my father bridled.

"Now see here, Stark —"

"Yes, can't go making accusations like that," Captain Carmady began.

"Accusations? My God, the little toad's accusing *me* of murder!"

My father growled, "I won't have you implying the boy's some kind of degenerate —"

"I don't care if he's degenerate or delirious or gone native. The fact is — the *fact* is — there's been a hunting accident, which incidentally has solved the problem of Jasim, Wizard of the Marshes. Jasim need no longer concern anyone. Can't we accept that, even be glad of it? Can't you, young Roger? Aren't you a loyal son of the Empire?"

"The Empire had nothing to do with it," Captain Carmady said shortly.

"All right." Captain Stark smiled. "But young Roger would give the Empire a bad name. Not to mention me."

If the Empire had nothing to do with it, there was no conspiracy. My father and Captain Carmady were innocent bystanders, and at least some values were holding up. They wouldn't for long, though, if Captain Stark got away with it.

I said, "If you didn't have orders to do it, you must have done it for fun. I'll bet something like this is why you had to leave India."

His face congealed into an immobile mask. After a while his upper lip peeled back from his teeth. He wasn't smiling.

"You vicious little bastard, what d'you know about India?"

Captain Carmady's mouth opened. The rest of him didn't move. I looked at my father. His nose twitched once and pulled one side of his mustache out of line. Thin rain had collected on his eyebrows.

Under which his eyes were suddenly uncertain.

Captain Carmady cleared his throat. He pointed at Stark with his pipe.

"Inexcusable, Jim. Apologise."

"If someone doesn't shut the little swine up I'll do it myself."

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"Apologise."

Captain Stark's shoulders moved slightly. Some of his old sparkle returned.

"What, for calling him a bastard?" His lips pulled back from his teeth again but it was the smile this time, big and clear and guileless. "To whom, old boy? Young Roger? His father? His *mother?*"

As someone said, it's not what you say but how you say it. There was a brief pause. Captain Stark then had a split second to look surprised when my father threw a looping, graceless punch that crashed into the side of Stark's jaw. He reeled away, fell sprawling in the mud.

I squelched a mad impulse to crow with delight. My father had moved decisively onto the side of the angels. He and Captain Carmady were decent men who would never let crime go unpunished. Amsha and I were vindicated and justice would be done.

No one spoke. Captain Stark pushed himself into a sitting position, glanced briefly toward the three guns standing against the tree. My father went to them, pulled the magazines off the two rifles and worked the bolt mechanisms to make sure there was nothing up either spout, then made sure he had unloaded the shotgun. He stuffed the magazines into a pocket. Then he and Captain Carmady traded long, significant looks. . . .

Rain trickled under my collar. I became conscious of the cold again.

There had been no conspiracy, but one was being born.

Down by the water the villagers stood like statues, watching us.

"I think you'd better find out what that girl's been telling the men," Captain Carmady murmured.

My father nodded and trudged through the rain toward the villagers. Captain Carmady curled his lip at Captain Stark.

"The natives are watching. You're making a display of yourself."

Captain Stark grinned and stayed where he was.

Captain Carmady herded me over by the guns, hunched over me. He looked shrunken. His eyes were lifeless and the weathered skin round them was fish-scale gray under a sheen of rain. He emptied his pipe by hitting it against the heel of his hand, then shoved it into a pocket.

"Of course you realize you must never breathe a word of this, Roger. Ever. To anyone."

". . . I don't understand."

He sighed. "No, of course you don't. But surely you can see that having one of *us* in one of *their* jails would be a bad blow to our prestige? It would tell them that we're no better than they are, and their perception is what matters. If you damage our prestige, you make our position shaky, defense of India, Suez Canal, all that. People might wonder if your father had raised a turncoat. . . ."

"You m-m-mean," I stuttered, beginning to shiver uncontrollably, "You're going to l-l-let him get away with it?"

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"Well . . . not completely. . . ."

"Do you think c-c-covering up a crime will be good for our p-p-prestige?"

"If it's done thoroughly, yes. If it keeps emotions calm, yes. If it denies ammunition to the city politicians and rabble-rousers, yes. Sorry, Roger. Unfortunate realities."

"You're still not going to make me an accessory to Jasim's murder," I told him.

"But no one will listen to you, Roger, and if they do they won't believe you. A schoolboy looking for a way to avoid being sent back to school in Alexandria? An illiterate native girl harboring who knows what silly, grimy ambition? Captain Stark will accuse you of all sorts of indecencies with that girl, and that'll get you both into trouble. Especially her. You don't want to bring her into disrepute, do you? You know what her people are likely to do. And of course once you mention this mind-reading business, well, it's just too silly for words, isn't it? You'd end up in an asylum."

"But I *saw* . . ."

"I know what you saw, Roger. But, taking the long view, that isn't really what matters, is it?"

His tone was practical, regretful. I was sure he had no orders to cover situations like this. He was just taking the long view and doing his best. He was an ordinary, awkward, decent man who'd never been stranded between two worlds and who'd had his values and priorities fixed for all time when he was a schoolboy at the end of the Victorian age. I had been raised with the same values. I felt the tug of them now. I could sacrifice Jasim's justice for the greater good, the Empire's safety, this country's peace! How noble it would be of me to act ignobly! Was willful obduracy anything more than a way to find favor with Amsha? Was lust a worthy motive for a young Englishman? . . . Cold, unsure, obscurely guilty, with the rain hissing down on the leaves and brush and squeezing past the neck of my sweater, I wavered.

My father trudged back from his talk with the villagers.

"I convinced Abbas she was imagining things. He'll keep her quiet, he knows which side of the bread his butter's on — the whole tribe's butter's on. Don't think we'll have trouble from that quarter." He gave me an authoritative stare. "You understand why we have to keep this quiet, don't you?"

"He understands," Captain Carmady said before I could speak. He smiled wanly. "He's pretty young to shoulder the obligations of the grownup world, but somehow I feel sure he'll prove up to them."

Which, for some reason, decided me. Perhaps I'd just reached the point where grownup expectations had to be disappointed on principle, and it was either that or I stop trying to be me and settle for being a pallid,

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unenfranchised reflection of them.

Captain Stark chose that moment to push himself to his feet and stroll over, wet, muddy, and apparently unworried.

'I say, you chaps," he said cheerily. "Everything under control?"

"Of c-c-course not," I said.

Rain fell with the indifference of an elder god. Pools of darkness oozed out of the reeds and threatened to swallow us. Amsha rode in the canoe carrying Jasim's body. In the village, the women wailed in ritual lamentation.

We warmed up and got our clothes reasonably dry around a fire in the *mudhif*. No one came in except Abbas and the fellow who kept supplying us with more glasses of hot tea. Abbas, clearly, didn't want me talking to anyone and causing trouble — which could mean economic reprisal. I don't know how he kept Amsha quiet. Perhaps a mixture of threats and the promise of protection. When she got used to it she may simply have found she was glad enough to have Jasim gone to forget how it happened. A lot of the villagers were probably just as glad. I never saw Amsha again. The boy Hamad appeared as we were leaving to pick up his reward for letting no one steal the Ford. My father overtipped him. We slithered and skidded all the way back to Amara.

Captain Stark was shipped to England, where he was quietly forced out of the R.A.F. I never learned what became of him. For me there were no



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dungeons or padded cells; I was simply quarantined. My kid sister Jill was scared, as though I'd caught the plague and grown horns. She howled a lot. Then we too were unceremoniously carted off to England, and I had visions of a boarding school as welcoming as the Bastille. But I had my father worried. I might write letters, or manage to talk to just the wrong person. But if I were far enough away, and kept busy . . .? So he shipped me off to a cousin of his who taught English Lit. at a small college near San Francisco. The Depression was on, and the cousin couldn't afford to turn down what my father offered to pay for my keep.

So I had another world to adapt to. Once I tried telling my story to an American-born cousin who got seriously mad at me for taking him for a gullible kid. So I gave up any thought of going public. Eventually time took the sawteeth off my anger and disappointment. Sometimes I doubted that Jasim had ever actually heard thoughts at all; at others I clung desperately to the hope that his talent might run, however crookedly, in Khaldun's family. Maybe Amsha's kids would have it. I hoped she found a good husband. I hoped she wouldn't be old and exhausted by work and childbearing by the time she was forty. . . .

For years my ambition was to return to the marshes. Briefly, in the mid-1950s, I might have — but suddenly I was scared. It had been too long. No one would remember me — or only as someone who'd betrayed a friend by silence. I was afraid of not finding Amsha. I was afraid of finding her and discovering myself an intruder in her eyes, of seeing how twenty years had changed her. Then the chance was gone. Practicalities and responsibilities intervened. In Iraq in '58 a military coup toppled the monarchy and got rid of the English . . .

My exile became comfortable, though I never felt I really belonged. After Pearl Harbor I had dutifully if warily enlisted but never saw duty outside the continental U.S. I didn't belong in the Army either, but wasn't dumb enough to show it.

My sister had been sent to one of those English boarding schools where the girls wear pleated blue uniforms and black wool stockings. Just after her fourteeth birthday she was killed by one of Hitler's buzz bombs. After the war my parents crossed the pond for a visit. My mother had grown fatalistic and depressing and my father more short-tempered. We never talked of Jasim or mind-reading or Stark's guilt, and I never called my father anything but "sir." I was in graduate school by then. I wound up with a couple of advanced degrees in American history, specializing in the colonial period. Which I teach. Married. Grown kids. It's a prosaic life.

But I still dream of the marshes. I heard recently they're draining them to get a few thousand more square miles for agriculture. I wake from those dreams filled with a sense of irrecoverable loss.

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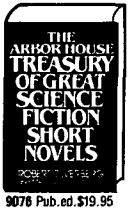
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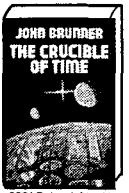
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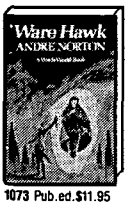
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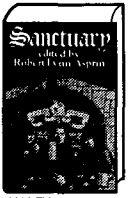
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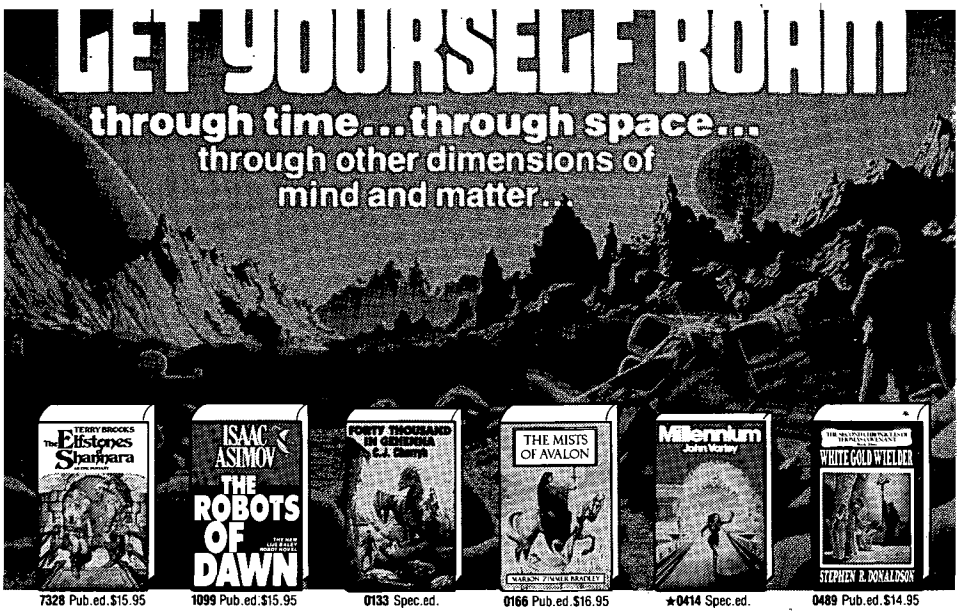
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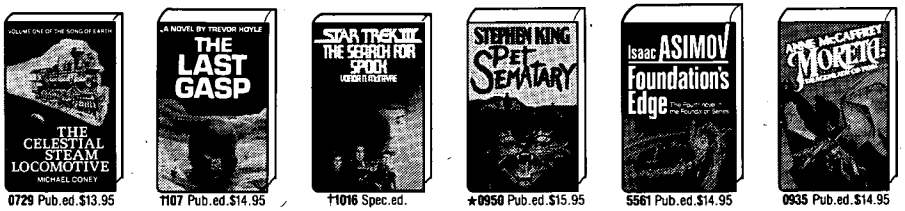
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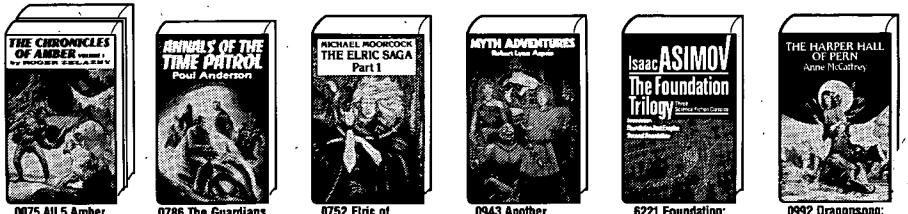
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